東京レイヴンズ
11
あざの耕平
Kouhei Azano
change:unchange
ファンタジア文庫

東京レイヴンズ
11
change:unchange
自分が溶けて世界と混ざる。
魂が彼岸に彷徨う。
だから、そうならないように、人は人に、生まれてすぐに「呪」をかけるのだ。
「夏目」
名前。
世界と混ざりそうだった自分が、自分の中に戻ってくる。

最年少『十二神将』
大連寺鈴鹿

地味眼鏡
百枝天馬

星読みの少女
倉橋京子

鬼の『生成り』
阿刀冬児

指名手配中
土御門春虎

元『十二神将』
大友陣

土御門夏目

相馬秋乃

東京レイヴンズ

TOKYO RAVENS

Chapter 1 - Past and Present

Please forgive my sudden letter.

Once again, I'm sorry for not sending any letters until now.

But I'm delighted to be able to write a letter like this.

I shed a few tears out of nostalgia.

It's really a greeting after a long silence.

I'm sorry. Also, thank you.

I'm alright.

Part 1

An oscillating sound of cicadas came from outside the room.

She returned to her childhood years, caught in her warm, hazy dream.

The backcountry residence was in the mountains. It was encircled by forests, and cicadas would be crying all day once it got to summer. Moreover, the sound of cicadas covered the world due to the sliding doors being opened for ventilation in the blazing hot days.

But to the young her, the so-called 'world' was just like that. For instance, the air, the light, the time. Also, the aura. Naturally, the sound of cicadas was also there as something natural.

A spacious, old, and yet cozy residence.

The hallway was lit by the dazzling summer sunlight and the smell of greenery floated in the air. In comparison to the hot and stifling weather outside, the cool touch of the floor absorbed the heat. She lay on the ground, fascinated by that

comfortable sensation. She carelessly listened to the oscillating sound of the cicadas.

Sound and light, aura and time. They all mixed together and became one. She was in the world and could feel the presence of it.

Her young self was powerless and weak, and wasn't even clear about the boundaries between the world and her 'self'. Hence, when she occasionally lost her sense of self, it seemed as if she dissolved into the world.

Her sense of self wasn't yet well-developed, and in many situations her senses were overwhelmed. Her current phase of sense of self was similar to a shell-less egg. Even if it had a form, it was weak and easily changed. More importantly, if she was a spirit sensor who had the ability to 'see' aura, then her senses tended to become overwhelmed even more strongly. Like a butterfly blown around by the wind, her sense of self would easily cross the line between worlds. Her sense of self dissolved, mixing with the world. Aura and time dissolved and mixed in along with the sound and light, becoming one.

Her soul hesitated in between.

In order to keep that from happening, people would cast 'magic' on others not long after they were born.

"Natsume."

A name.

She hastily rose after being called upon. Her sense of self that had mixed with the world returned to her body.

"Natsume."

A deep and gentle voice. Also, that voice contained a special emotion for her. She finally regained her sense of self after being called upon by her name with such emotion. At the same time, her young self grew distance - her consciousness surfaced inside the room.

She awoke in the room she had been in for a long time, slowly opening her eyes.

"......Natsume?"

Tsuchimikado Natsume slowly opened her eyes upon being woken up by that voice.

While her vision was hazy, she noticed a gaze focused on her body. It was the master of the voice.

A deep and gentle voice. Also, a motionless gaze watching her.

"......Harutora-kun....."

After her sleeptalking, she became conscious that the person wasn't Harutora. Her mind wake up in an instant. Natsume's eyes widened and she turned her body within the covers.

"F-Father.....!?"

It was a kimono-wearing man who sat on the chair next to the bed. He wore gold-rimmed eyeglasses and was an intellectual yet deeply shadowed man.

Natsume's father and the current head of the Tsuchimikado family, Tsuchimikado Yasuzumi.

Natsume tried to rise in a panic but couldn't muster the energy.

Then, "That's fine." Yasuzumi briefly said.

"Don't move for now, you're probably quite unsettled. Both your body and your heart."

A slow, flat tone. But it definitely wasn't a cold tone.

Yasuzumi's normal calm couldn't be felt from his expression. In addition, a feeling of fatigue unlike usual had surfaced on him. However, even so, his body

was still straight as he sat on the chair and no cloudiness could be seen in the depths of the eyes behind his glasses.

"....."

Natsume laid on the bed, gazing at Yasuzumi in a daze.

She didn't understand what had happened. She couldn't understand the situation. Also, where was this? Where was she right now? An unfamiliar room. An unfamiliar bed. Unfamiliar sheets. An unfamiliar pillow.

.....No.

She knew. Right. Until recently, Harutora - Harutora ought to have been in the place that Yasuzumi sat right now.

Harutora's left eye had been covered by a cloth. He had been extremely gentle. And he had held her hand.

Also, there was the business with Hokuto.

He knew about how Natsume had been the one controlling Hokuto. She had told Harutora about her love. Harutora had also smiled at Natsume--

...A dream?

No. Actually, she had recollections of this room's scenery. She clearly remembered the sensation of their hands clasping tightly and their lips touching.

Then--

".....F-Father. Where's Harutora-kun.....?"

Yasuzumi's expression flickered because of Natsume's question. But the voice he answered the question with was always calm in order to keep Natsume's unsettledness to a minimum.

"He - left after entrusting you to us."

"......Eh?"

"It was just now. A shikigami appeared in front of us while we were searching for you. That shikigami returned to a shikigami charm very quickly, but characters were appended to it. It was a message from Harutora with this place and some explanation written on it. It also wrote that he was entrusting you to us."

Natsume's eyes widened as she listened to Yasuzumi's reply. Then after she heard that, Harutora's final words awoke in Natsume's mind.

... 'Sorry, Natsume. But someday..... I'll definitely meet you again.....'

She recalled it. In the end, Harutora had announced a 'farewell' to Natsume.

But--

"W-What about his departure? Where did he go? Why? Why did Harutora-kun leave me--"

A restlessness that even she didn't understand gripped her heart. Her consciousness back then had been vague and she hadn't been able to understand the situation. Harutora had left? He wasn't here anymore? Why? No, what were the circumstances? Why was she bedridden, and why had Harutora's left eye been covered? Just the two of them in an unfamiliar location. What kind of story would lead to that situation--

... 'Go, Raven's Wing. Return to your master's side.'

"......Ah."

She remembered. Natsume's body went stiff and her breathing halted.

Her memories immediately linked and exploded in her mind. A red-haired girl holding a birdcage. A three-legged raven shikigami. Scattered black feathers and golden particles of light. Also, the possessed, out-of-control Harutora. Herself, who had rode Yukikaze and chased after the flying Harutora.

The faint smell of gunpowder floating in the air and the black night sky embellished with fireworks. The sky and the wind howling, blowing her hair into a mess, and peeling away the summer heat. She clearly recalled her bucking as she sat on Yukikaze, her fretful heartbeat, and her depression at being backed into a corner.

Also, she had made a decision at the time.

The pain of her chest being pierced through and the numbness it soon turned into after surmounting her limits. Her body being wrapped by cold and filled with emptiness soon afterwards. The loneliness and feeling of discontinuity as if she had descended into an empty darkness. But she was held in Harutora's arms and barely held on to her consciousness. She wanted to convey it. She tightly grasped those thoughts and wove words with her final strength.

And then--

"I....."

Died.

She should have.

Being saved afterwards - she didn't feel that it was possible. But why was she living? Was there any link with the reason Harutora had left? He had entrusted her to her father - no, why was her father here? She didn't know. She couldn't understand. What had happened? How had it ended up? After that - after she stopped Harutora's rampage, what exactly had happened--

"Natsume."

Yasuzumi spoke up. Natsume's confused thoughts were immediately pulled back to the bed.

"It's alright. So calm down."

Neither agitated nor pressuring.

But they were 'powerful' words. As if they were first-class spirit language.

"First, the room you're in is a business hotel inside Tokyo. Though they're out right now, Takahiro and Chizuru are here too."

"......Uncle..... and Aunt too?"

Yasuzumi affirmed Natsume's meek words and then continued.

"Natsume. We don't know everything that's happened. Rather, all we know is a very small part of the current situation. Even so, I'll explain as much as I know about what happened while you were unconscious. Perhaps it's a situation that surpasses your imagination."

"....."

"But as I said before, you're fine for now. Hence, settle down and calmly accept what I'm going to begin saying now."

Yasuzumi gazed into Natsume's eyes and said that.

Yasuzumi's tone wasn't a kind of gentle, protective tone meant to comfort her. It wasn't that kind. Rather, it was more like a tone with which he gave a necessary order, making her stand back up with her own strength. Moreover, it was completely supportive and not forceful.

Natsume stared straight at Yasuzumi.

How long had it been since she had spoken with her father face-to-face like this? Her father's voice sounded slightly more aged than she remembered now that she hadn't heard it for a long time. Moreover, his appearance was the same. She felt like her father ought to be a bit younger. In other words, that was probably proof that Natsume hadn't truly looked Yasuzumi in the face for a long time.

Yasuzumi's gaze pointed straight at Natsume. Natsume had never been good at dealing with that look of her father's. It wasn't just his look. She wasn't good at

dealing with her father in the first place. It definitely wasn't hate, but she didn't know how to interact with him. Moreover, that point was still unchanged now.

But Natsume suddenly realized as she stared straight at Yasuzumi.

Around the corner of his eye. She hadn't immediately reacted since he was wearing glasses, but he looked similar to someone.

Who was it? Right as she thought about it, someone's face emerged.

...Harutora-kun.....

Right. Harutora-kun, the last person she had seen. His left eye had been covered by a cloth, but she still thought of Harutora-kun from back then.

Similar.

But that was natural. As for why.....

... 'Harutora. You were originally the main family's child..... the child of Tsuchimikado Yasuzumi.'

"....."

She couldn't help but turn away. "Natsume?" Yasuzumi queried. But Natsume couldn't respond.

Back then, she - Souma Takiko - had said it. She had said that Harutora was the reincarnation of Tsuchimikado Yakou, and Natsume was the 'decoy' that Yasuzumi had prepared. And actually, the 'Raven's Wing' had chosen Harutora and possessed him. What she spoke of had been correct.

Harutora and Yasuzumi were true relatives. The progeny of the Tsuchimikado.

Then - what about her?

"....."

She couldn't ask. The person who knew the answer was right before her, but she couldn't ask about it. Natsume kept utterly quiet, frozen on the bed.

The silence wasn't short. The silence itself seemed as if it were reproaching her. Natsume trembled slightly.

Yasuzumi said to accept it. But.....

He stayed silent. But to Natsume, it was a silence that she felt would continue forever.

But.

"......I."

Yasuzumi opened his mouth. Natsume wordlessly and reflexively turned her gaze towards him.

"I have many things I have to say."

Yasuzumi's expression was composed. He wasn't angry, nor was he sad or smiling. He was unchanged from usual. Right, this person had always been like this. She never knew what he was thinking. Hence, she wasn't good at dealing with him.

But right now, his calm and composed attitude relieved Natsume's stiffness bit by bit.

"You don't need to be anxious. I'd like you to spend some time and slowly listen to me."

Natsume still couldn't respond. But this time, she didn't avert her gaze.

The room with just the two of them was covered by another silence.

After a period of time, Natsume slowly nodded slightly.

The sunlight outside the window had already reached its highest noontime point. The clamorous sound of cicadas rang out just like she remembered.

Part 2

The population distribution of Tokyo changed greatly in a brief span as it welcomed the new year.

The business district and most of the commercial streets were deserted, and on the other hand, the residential areas were more packed than usual, and shrines and their surroundings buzzed noisily with a large number of people. The flow of people was also unlike normal. Because it was a city, the number of people moving around didn't change by too much, but their routes and times were greatly different from normal.

The locations and change in actions of these people were also related to the spiritual aspect of the city of Tokyo. This was also because of the aura that every human more or less carried. Hence, the movements of large amounts of people would have an effect on the spirit flow that pumped through the ground - though temporary. A 'change' in the movement of people would create 'disorder' in the spirit flow.

The disorder of the spirit flow was linked with aura imbalance, and aura imbalance would give rise to spiritual disasters if it became serious. But because it knew of these tendencies, the Onmyou Agency had prepared countermeasures beforehand. It was a demonic aura purification that they performed every New Year. A large-scale magic ceremony with the goal of stabilizing the aura inside Tokyo.

The demonic aura purification would be carried out on the first days of the seasons along with New Year's Day. Even among these, the ceremony held on New Year's was the largest. The ceremony would continue until the last moment before the new year arrived, and the time from then until afternoon the next day would be occupied by the cleanup afterwards. The New Year's vacation would

follow right afterwards. In other words, the Onmyou Agency's normal duties - other than those of the Exorcist Bureau responsible for purifying spiritual disasters - would mostly halt around New Year's.

"Well, the Onmyou Agency's also a 'government agency'."

It was Tsuchimikado Takahiro, who had once belonged to the Onmyou Agency Mystical Crime Investigation Department himself, who said this.

In any case, to the fugitive Tsuchimikado clan, the New Year was a great opportunity when the Onmyou Agency's manpower resources were shifted to the demonic aura purification. They had carefully hidden their traces and succeeded in slipping into Tokyo.

The Tsuchimikado family head Yasuzumi. Takahiro and his wife Chizuru of the branch family. Natsume. Also, Souma Akino who had moved together with them after the 'dark temple' Seishuku Temple had been destroyed, for a total of five people.

The stronghold they had selected wasn't in the western district. Rather, it was western Kichijoji[1]. Moreover, it was an old private home away from the station.

"It's a house managed by an 'acquaintance' of an 'acquaintance', but it seems that their renovation plans stopped, so it's become an empty house for the year. They left right after the renovation plans were decided, so we can borrow it without worry."

"......Though you say that, those two 'acquaintances' have their own hidden secrets, right?"

"No one in this world has no secrets."

Takahiro casually waved away his wife's accusation while announcing their new hiding place.

It was Natsume's first time experiencing a 'nuclear family'.

This was a two-floor wooden building. Allegedly, it had been built more than fifty years ago, and it could accidentally be mistaken for an abandoned building from its external appearance, so no wonder they had decided to renovate it. A small courtyard was built into it, but it was barren inside. It was a marvel that there was running water and electricity.

Chizuru shook her head, dumbfounded:

"We're going to have to clean up first."

With that, the Tsuchimikado family began an early spring cleaning in the beginning of the first month.

If they used shikigami, it would save trouble with their work, but they were fugitives right now after all, so they wanted to use as little non-stealth first-class magic as possible. Of course, they couldn't call on any relevant professionals, as they wanted to avoid attention from nearby residents if at all possible. With that, all they could do to avoid others' attention was secretly do it by themselves.

As a result, the cleaning that accompanied their moving in took two whole days.

"Honestly, it would be a waste if we have to move locations right away again."

Though Chizuru muttered that, she had deliberately rectified the living environment because they were anticipating that they would keep this hiding place for a long time - at least, it wouldn't end in a few days.

Though it had been an event from last year, the Tsuchimikado family had suffered an attack from the Onmyou Agency higher-ups trying to take back the Raven's Wing. As a result, the Raven's Wing had been stolen and the main family residence had been completely burned down. Since then, Yasuzumi and the others had moved around, continuously living fugitive lives. They had constantly been hiding in local cities since Harutora had lost control and taken Natsume back from Tokyo. That was because it was a bit harder for the Onmyou Agency to monitor things away from Tokyo.

But this year, they had slipped into Tokyo at the Onmyou Agency's doorstep. This was basically a decision made by Yasuzumi's divination. He had predicted that there would be huge movements in Tokyo in the near future, and they had braved danger and come to Tokyo in order to be able to deal with the situation. In other words, it had been predestined that they would be living in this house until the 'huge movement' that Yasuzumi predicted happened.

Of course, if the Onmyou Agency learned of this, they would have to change locations immediately.

"Anyway, we'll end here today. Let's eat. There's no gas here, so we'll use a grill in the courtyard."

It was Chizuru's style to never be lacking in food everyday even if they were living a fugitive life. Today's dinner was on a charcoal grill. Natsume and Akino brought cardboard boxes to the courtyard to use as chairs, Takahiro sat on the porch, and Chizuru headed over to light the grill.

The sun set rather early in this season, and it was already dim around. It seemed like dining in the courtyard would leave an impression on the neighbors, but fortunately, the courtyard faced a wall of a nearby warehouse. Hence, they were in a particularly cluttered area. But in these circumstances, they wouldn't be seen by those around them, so it was very convenient.

"Where's Yasuzumi?"

"He's on the second floor looking around. I already called him anyway, he'll only come after he's done."

"He does whatever he wants, huh. Well, we've known that. ...Ah, Natsume-chan, Akino-chan, I'll leave the chopsticks and plates to you."

"Okay."

"O-O-Okay."

Following Chizuru's instructions, Natsume and Akino helped to carry out the dinner's preparation work.

Akino was very happy when she heard it was mealtime. Natsume couldn't help but smile at that Akino. Their new resident since last winter always loved to eat. Though she herself denied making it, her blissful expression while eating had even been teased by Takahiro and Chizuru before.

Natsume was currently eighteen. On the other hand, Akino seemed to be unclear about her actual age. It was because she had been left at Seishuku Temple while still a baby. However, she had said 'probably twelve or thirteen'. She was as tall as Natsume, and her face was still childish. Similar to how Natsume tied up her long black hair with a pink ribbon, Akino tied her hair into two pigtails. She wore slightly large glasses and looked like a rather timid girl.

No, she didn't 'look like' one, she was actually very timid. She was always cautious, soft-spoken, and didn't voice her opinion. She was shy and didn't have much confidence in herself, and hence her self-esteem seemed to have unconsciously become low. After all, Akino's living environment until now had been extremely peculiar, and she also possessed a peculiar spiritual nature. Because of that, she had become withdrawn and counted as a helpless case on some level.

Recently, she had stopped adopting her cautious attitude in their daily life, but that probably stemmed from Takahiro and Chizuru's clever communication abilities. Actually, it looked like it took all her effort to greet the reticent Yasuzumi. Maybe Yasuzumi currently hadn't shown his face at dinner out of a sort of goodwill, to keep Akino from feeling tense.

"I'm thinking today's dinner will be a barbeque. Anyway, grill and eat as much as you want."

"Your best dish, honey."

"Oh my, dear, what did you say?"

"No, no, the fire's masterfully done as always."

Takahiro with a composed smile and Chizuru going "Right?" with a smile of warning. Takahiro was a large man who resembled a wrestler, but he carried a gentle atmosphere that made one associate him with a huge herbivore. In contrast to him, Chizuru was small and lively, like a carnivorous hunting feline. They were a starkly-contrasting yet well-matched pair of spouses.

"Then, Akino-chan, what do you want to eat? I'll help get it for you."

"U-Um, meat!"

"Hoho, you're as straightforward as always when it comes to food."

"Eh?"

"Because Akino's interests are eighty percent focused on meals."

"T-That's not true, you know? There are other things like..... W-Well, then I'll start with vegetables....."

Akino's face was so sad when she proposed this that Natsume couldn't help but laugh out loud as she sat next to her.

"It's alright, Akino. Auntie said to eat as much as you wanted, right? Here."

She placed beef on the grill's grid. Akino's face immediately lit up. That straightforward readiness and carefreeness was part of Akino's adorable personality.

Akino stared at the beef on the grid. Smiling wryly at how serious she was, Chizuru also started grilling the cut ingredients with a happy expression. "Natsume, do you want some too?" Chizuru spoke and Natsume answered with an "Okay". Takahiro planned on letting the children go first and still sat on the porch, casually drinking tea while looking at the female group surrounding the grill.

It was a scene like a true family. However, actually, not a single person of the five in the family were blood-related. Though Yasuzumi and Takahiro were both

Tsuchimikado family members, the Tsuchimikado main and branch families had allegedly been separated for a long time. Maybe they could be called relatives, but they weren't really blood relatives.

A traditional Onmyoudou family. The Tsuchimikado that had been famous since ancient history.

But they were actually like this. It felt empty - but that said, it was unavoidable that she would find it unusual.

A bashful smile surfaced on Akino and she carefully used her chopsticks to turn over the beef on the grid several times. "That's poor manners, you know." Even though she reproached that, Chizuru still arranged chicken on it. It was bitingly cold oustide, but the crackling charcoal grill and the familiar people surrounding it warmed her heart and body.

"....."

Natsume raised her head to look at the second floor of the house. Light shone out of the second-floor glass windows. The lights that Yasuzumi had turned on.

She suddenly remembered her origins.

Natsume had been raised as the heir to the Tsuchimikado. As the son of the current head Tsuchimikado Yasuzumi.

However, Yasuzumi's true child was Harutora and not Natsume. Then where had Natsume been born? Who were her true parents?

When Harutora left and Yasuzumi came to welcome Natsume, her adoptive father had told her the answer himself before she opened her mouth.

"Natsume, do you still remember the Wakasugi family?"

Yasuzumi had posed this question first. His calm, steady tone was just like always. Natsume nodded on the bed.

The Wakasugi family was the maiden family of Natsume's dead mother - or more accurately, her adoptive mother - Tsuchimikado Yuuko.

Like the Kurahashi, the Wakasugi family was an old branch family of the Tsuchimikado. It was a powerful traditional family on the level of the Kurahashi, and they had been even more influential with regard to the not-yet-declined main family during the Meiji period. But unlike the Kurahashi that assisted Tsuchimikado Yakou and the Tsuchimikado family in recreating and reviving the magic community, the Wakasugi family had stayed out of things. They chose to keep a distance from the central powers and meticulously guard the traditional systems. In the end, although they were fortunate enough to avoid the chaos of the Pacific War, they were overwhelmed by the waves of the era and gradually declined.

Tsuchimikado Yuuko, whose maiden name had been Wakasugi, had been born in that family.

Yuuko had died as a twenty-year-old woman after giving birth to Harutora. Allegedly, she had recovered poorly after the birth, but it seemed that she had been very frail to begin with. Naturally, Natsume - and perhaps Harutora as well - had no memories of her. She was a gentle woman, as her name implied[2], that she had only seen in photographs in the residence. The child Natsume had once gazed patiently for several hours at the photographs she had left behind.

But the first person Natsume thought of when she heard 'Wakasugi' wasn't Tsuchimikado Yuuko, but rather her mother.

When Yuuko married Yasuzumi, her father had been near the end of his life. After her daughter died, her left-alone mother had often visited Yasuzumi's residence to help him, as he wasn't used to raising a child. The childhood Natsume had once admired her as the 'Wakasugi granny'. Though she had died of illness before Natsume reached elementary school, Natsume remembered what she had heard from the mother very clearly.

But.....

"You aren't looking for comforting lies or vague explanations right now. Therefore, I'll speak plainly. Natsume, you were placed on the Wakasugi's doorsteps not long after you were born. That almost never happens anymore..... But such things happened in olden times. The Wakasugi family was very famous in that era as a traditional Onmyoudou family."

It would be a lie to say that she wasn't unsettled. In other words, she was an abandoned child.

Maybe Akino was also an example of this, but there weren't many examples of children being abandoned by their parents after displaying spiritual abilities. Such tendencies were particularly notable outside of those who were born in families related to magic for generations. Normally, talent as a practitioner was decided to a great extent by bloodline, but naturally there were also exceptions. That was where the 'receptacles' of practitioners with no positions, like the Seishuku Temple where Akino had been - and along with traditional families of magic - were effective. There was a history of that.

"You were dropped off several days after Yuuko died. The Wakasugi mother who noticed the child placed next to the entrance seemed to feel that you were the reincarnation of Yuuko. But she was already old. It was very difficult for her to raise you, but she didn't plan on entrusting you to an orphanage, so she spoke to me about it. Then..... When I saw you, a child the same age as the just-born Harutora, a thought flashed through my mind like electricity. Natsume, that was..... the matter of raising you as Harutora's substitute."

What Yasuzumi spoke of were things that she had half-anticipated. Even so, Natsume couldn't stop her body from trembling.

The world that she had so naturally lived in was slowly crumbling from pure words. What was this if not magic? The truth that Yasuzumi spoke of was a reconstruction of the world to Natsume. Out of everything she had experienced to this point, this was the cruelest and most merciless second-class magic.

Yasuzumi continued.

"The reasons for which I chose to do that are too complicated to explain right now. But what I can say is that I had no choice at the time. It wasn't just depression from the difficulty of raising a child alone as a man. I was overwhelmed by the special destiny that the child was burdened by - his final fate - because I couldn't completely anticipate it. I didn't know what the correct answer was or what to do as the head of the Tsuchimikado or as that child's father."

Yasuzumi remained calm as he said this. Perhaps he had understood for a long time that the day would come when he would finally confess the truth to Natsume.

"That's why I understood the thought that flashed through my mind after seeing you as divine intervention. Fortunately - perhaps it's wrong to say that, but Takahiro and Chizuru had been unable to have a child for a long time. Because I knew the two of them wanted a child, I decided to entrust Harutora to Takahiro and Chizuru..... And to raise you."

Yasuzumi's eyes looked straight at Natsume - but he spoke with a look as if gazing far away.

Hypothetically--

If Natsume's relationship with Yasuzumi had been extremely good since before, then the shock Natsume received might have been far more than her current unsettledness. After all, it was a confession from the man she has always trusted as her 'father' ever since birth. Maybe she would have been irreversibly hurt by the rebuilding of her world into a dissimilar dimension.

However, ironically, Natsume herself understood that the relationship between the two of them was indifferent and businesslike. Hence, Natsume could accept the truth that she heard as simple facts. Maybe Yasuzumi had only treated Natsume the way he had because he had considered this. Natsume couldn't speculate about his outstanding 'divination' ability.

Of course, she wasn't unaffected.

But her chat with Yasuzumi afterwards saved Natsume's 'heart'.

Just then, Natsume raised her body from where it lay on the bed. Yasuzumi didn't stop her this time.

"......One thing."

Natsume turned her face away and asked.

"Please tell me one thing..... Father, did you ever think of using me as 'Harutora-kun's substitute'?"

Even if she didn't look that way, she felt Yasuzumi's slightly shivering presence.

After a brief period of time, "......I can't say I didn't think that way." Yasuzumi replied.

The brief period of time until the moment he replied could be taken as proof that Yasuzumi was being truthful.

"But my primary goal wasn't to make you into Harutora's substitute. .....To be honest, it wasn't only Mother Wakasugi who felt that you were Yuuko's reincarnation. I was the same. She was smiling and coming to help the useless me who was terrified and stunned in front of fate. That's how I felt when Mother Wakasugi brought you."

Natsume turned her face towards Yasuzumi when she heard those words with such an uncharacteristic tone.

At that moment, a bitter, self-deprecating expression had surfaced on Yasuzumi's face. It was Natsume's first time seeing that expression. It wasn't an expression of the Tsuchimikado family head, nor one of her father. It was just the expression of a man expressing his feelings.

Then--

"Natsume."

Yasuzumi spoke in a flat voice.

"Would you carry the Tsuchimikado burden together with Harutora? When Harutora faces his own fate, will you be able to become his strength? The reason I raised you..... were those prayers."

Those words - desires - calmly and swiftly tinted Natsume's heart. The twisted world that had crumbled and been reconstructed inside of Natsume. The several cracks and voices that had formed in the middle of that world were filled and supported by them.

Of course, Yasuzumi's desire was a one-sided exhortation, that was probably the truth.

Even so, Natsume felt that she had been 'acknowledged' as a person when she heard Yasuzumi's confession. She wasn't purely being viewed as a being constructed for use as a replacement, but rather as a person who had been raised with the future in mind, entrusted with a desire.

Tsuchimikado Natsume had died once.

And then in that business hotel room where she couldn't even remember her own name, she had awakened - in multiple senses - to the world. She wasn't of the Tsuchimikado, but she was undoubtedly part of the Tsuchimikado family. Even if she wasn't Yasuzumi's daughter, she was a direct disciple of his.

"....."

By the time she noticed it, Natsume had already been staring at the second-floor window for a long time.

Just then--

"Natsume-chan? Are you not hungry?"

Chizuru's voice called Natsume back from her memories. Upon careful inspection, all of the food on the grid had been changed.

Akino was also sequentially adding salt, soy sauce, and miso and then eating the grilled food with so much momentum that it seemed she was unwilling to let the grill go. Natsume smiled while reaching out her own chopsticks. Even Natsume was hungry.

The fire of the grill crackled and warmed her hands and cheeks. Akino opened and shut her mouth while chewing a grilled year cake[3]. The aromatic smell of the fat dripping from the meat and the soy sauce sprinkled on the mushrooms made her nose itch.

No matter how shocking the truth placed in front of her was, she would feel hungry as time went by and meals would taste delicious. That was probably something to be extremely grateful for.

".....Ahh! Delicious!"

Akino looked enraptured, an ecstatic smile surfacing on her face. It was probably rare to see such a straightforwardly joyful expression. Chizuru, who had prepared the food, was also satisfied.

Possibly seeing that it was about time, Takahiro rose from the porch.

Suddenly--

"Right. Natsume, it's time for the incense again."

"Ah, you're right. Alright."

Natsume nodded at Takahiro's words, also about to finish eating. Akino turned to look at Natsume, shooting her a look of nothing other than sympathy.

"You have it tough, Natsume. You can't let that incense run out, right?"

"It's not that I can't..... It's just in case. It's not too much effort."

Natsume smiled and replied to Akino's question.

The incense on Natsume's clothes was something called 'soul-forging incense'. It was believed to be a spiritual medicine that called back the souls of dead humans. But in modern Onmyou law, all 'soul'-related magic was designated as forbidden magic, and hence there were very few users. It was a magical drug used in ancient magic.

When Harutora had been possessed by the Raven's Wing, Natsume had sacrificed herself to stop her out-of-control childhood friend. At that time, Natsume had lost her life once.

But after that, Harutora had performed the Taizan Fukun Ritual on the dead Natsume after awakening as Yakou - though it was still a mystery whether he truly was Yakou or not. The secret soul art passed down by the Tsuchimikado family had allowed Natsume to reawaken in the world.

But it seemed that the resurrection wasn't complete.

The details were unknown to her. All Natsume knew was that the connection between her body and soul was in an extremely unstable state. Natsume's physical body, which had been wounded by the Raven's Wing, had been treated by Harutora's magic. Even if diagnosed by an Onmyou doctor, the current Natsume's body ought to be declared as in a completely normal condition.

But, she hadn't been fully treated 'spiritually'.

It didn't need to be said that the current systems of magic couldn't explain what souls were. Natsume herself didn't even concretely understand what it meant by having an unstable connection between the body and the soul. But the explanation that 'the connection between the body and the soul is unstable' was very appropriate to anyone who 'saw' Natsume's spiritual condition.

Of course, Harutora, who had performed the Taizan Fukun Ritual, seemed to understand that Natsume's resurrection wasn't complete. So, Harutora had cast a peculiar magic in order to forcefully keep Natsume's soul in this world. He had used Natsume's shikigami Hokuto - a dragon that was the Tsuchimikado guardian beast - as a magical link between Natsume's soul and body. He had used Hokuto to connect Natsume's soul to her body. Hence, Natsume was currently in a state of being spiritually 'possessed' by Hokuto. In other words, she was in a state of being a 'dragon living spirit'.

The magic that made use of Hokuto was Harutora's original creation, and the structure of the magic was confusing even in the eyes of the Tsuchimikados. But

they knew that it was quite a powerful magic. Because of that, they used the spirit-forging incense to stabilize Natsume's spirit as the lowest level of aid.

"Though I say that, it's certainly inconvenient the way it is right now. It would be better to think of something else....."

"Please don't worry, Uncle. Though it's inconvenient, it's nothing much. It's like regularly taking medicine, I don't really mind."

After all, it was a miracle that she was still living now. Being unable to let the incense run out didn't even count as a hardship if it was to maintain that miracle.

Rather, she was more concerned about Harutora's intent.

"Honestly, that kid's as unpromising as always, dropping the ball at the crucial moment. He was dipping his hand into forbidden magic anyways, so why not resurrect someone skillfully?"

Chizuru muttered some very radical and forthright things. "Honey." Takahiro mediated wryly and Natsume couldn't help but smile.

Harutora had resurrected Natsume. But she was in an incomplete form. Was that deliberate on Harutora's part or not? Most importantly, why had Harutora entrusted her to Yasuzumi in such a state and hidden his traces? Natsume was currently in this kind of condition..... Then, what about Harutora? Was Harutora currently truly 'Harutora'? At least the 'Harutora' that Natsume was familiar with shouldn't be able to call back a soul with the Taizan Fukun Ritual or use a dragon to tie it to a body. In that case, might the current 'Harutora' already have become a 'Harutora' that Natsume didn't recognize?

It was unclear no matter how much she thought. Then all she could do was meet the person directly and confirm things. Hence, Natsume chased after Harutora.

No matter how long it took, she would definitely catch up to him. Being unable to let the incense run out wasn't a big problem for that.

"On another note, Uncle. Is there any news about everyone from the academy?"

Natsume gave up her seat next to the grill as she asked Takahiro. Actually, Takahiro hadn't participated in today's cleaning. He had taken different actions from everyone, doing his best to gather information.

Takahiro was a former Mystical Investigator. Possessing individual information channels and outlets could be called a necessary skill to a Mystical Investigator - especially an outstanding Mystical Investigator. Takahiro had worked at the Onmyou Agency almost twenty years ago, but several channels were still usable. Even this house had been arranged through those outlets.

Even so--

"I investigated that too. But there hasn't been any significant progress from the investigation before we came to Tokyo."

Takahiro spoke apologetically. "I see....." Natsume's shoulders slumped in dejection.

Naturally, Takahiro had gathered all the information he could before they had entered Tokyo. That included things related to the Onmyou Academy's circumstances and information about Natsume's past classmates. Also, now that they were hiding in a nearby city, Takahiro had accepted Natsume's request to look up on the present situation of those classmates to the extent of his information.

A huge incident had happened with the Onmyou Agency on the day of Natsume's death. The famous Onmyouji with the moniker 'D' - Ashiya Doman - had attacked the agency building. In addition, Harutora, who had lost control because of the Raven's Wing and been confined in the agency building, had escaped during the commotion. Harutora had used the Taizan Fukun Ritual to resurrect Natsume soon afterwards.

But that incident was not known to many, and even among the related people there were very few who grasped everything that had happened. It appeared that several larger and smaller incidents were intricately involved with each other, and

the Onmyou Agency's official explanation had held a great deal of doubt. Hence, various conjectures had risen on the inside.

But one thing that could be said for certain was that in addition to Harutora, his other classmates seemed to have been involved in the incident.

"Touji-kun's whereabouts have been unknown since that incident, the Kurahashi family daughter temporarily took some time off from the academy, but later returned to school around the time of Principal Kurahashi's retirement. Also, Momoe Tenma is still in the academy. In contrast to him, the 'Child Prodigy' Dairenji Suzuka, who entered a year below, withdrew from the academy after the incident and returned to the Onmyou Agency."

Takahiro moved to sit in front of the grill, deliberately mentioning the situation of Natsume's friends again.

"Outside of Touji-kun, the others appear to be 'the same as before' on the surface. But take the Kurahashi family girl for example - Kyouko, I believe. She is being monitored quite openly. Principal Kurahashi - or more accurately, former principal - is also cooped up inside the Kurahashi family residence and cannot come out. In truth, she is in a state of house arrest. And the 'Child Prodigy'. The sudden reversion by the Onmyou Agency was a request from the higher-ups, but it seems that she is performing research assigned directly by the Chief. Her media exposure from before has completely vanished and she cannot be contacted from the outside."

The 'changes' that had happened consecutively to Natsume's classmates could be taken as 'indirect evidence'. Perhaps they had participated to some degree in Harutora's escape from captivity, or had assisted him. Although they had succeeded in letting Harutora escape, Touji had become a fugitive afterwards and the others had been arrested and then put under surveillance by the Onmyou Agency. Principal Kurahashi's sudden resignation probably had something to do with it as well.

In any case, they had confirmed Kyouko, Tenma, Suzuka, and Principal Kurahashi's locations. It seemed that they were alright for now.

However, the concerning one was Touji.

".....Is Touji-kun moving together with Harutora-kun.....?"

"Hard to say." Takahiro replied cautiously to Natsume's question.

"That guy has a clear head, and he's wise to the world even though he's young. But I don't think he would be able to escape the eyes of the Onmyou Agency alone for this period of over a year. I believe he's probably staying in some group or organization, or has gotten close to people used to 'those kinds of things'. .....But it's doubtful to say that person is Harutora. Judging purely by that guy's movements, it doesn't seem like Touji-kun's with him."

After that incident, Harutora had taken actions equivalent to declaring war against the Onmyou Agency. He had caused various situations within Tokyo and clashed with the Onmyou Agency. He had even been called a terrorist among the magic community.

Needless to say, Takahiro had also gathered information on that area, but as he saw it, there were no signs expressing that Touji was with Harutora. Of course, that was purely speculative analysis - or perhaps something closer to 'instinct'.

".....Then is he with Ohtomo-sensei like we talked about before?"

There was also someone other than Touji who had vanished after that incident. It was Ohtomo Jin, the homeroom teacher of Natsume and the others.

At the time, Ohtomo had been wounded from his magic battle with Ashiya Doman and had been recuperating outside the academy. But the day before Natsume's death, he slipped out of the hospital and appeared before her. At the time, Natsume hadn't been getting along well with Kyouko and had successfully mended their relationship by accepting Ohtomo's proposal. Natsume still vividly recalled Ohtomo's powerful words of assistance that had pushed her from behind.

But Ohtomo had vanished after that.

Allegedly, he had given Principal Kurahashi a letter of resignation the day that he helped Natsume out. That probably expressed that he had truly determined to 'act'. Also, the principal had definitely already approved of it since she had taken care of Ohtomo's resignation. Or it was also possible that it was a request from the principal.

In that case, she didn't feel that he was unrelated to the commotion that had happened at the Onmyou Agency building. Just like her classmates, they ought to believe that he had a connection to Harutora's escape. Then were Touji and Ohtomo, who had vanished at the same time, currently moving together and hiding underground? ...That was the conjecture Takahiro had brought up after analyzing the information.

But--

"No, come to think of it....."

Takahiro's face suddenly turned uneasy, and he scratched his thinly-haired head.

"I've also been careless..... That teacher named Ohtomo, he has a fake leg and carries a cane, if I remember correctly?"

"Eh? Yes, that's right."

Natsume replied perplexedly to the unexpected question.

Chizuru had run into Ohtomo three times before, but Takahiro had never met him directly. Still, his appearance and peresonality had been described to him several times. Why was he only confirming now? She didn't understand the reason.

"Uncle? Do you have any news on Ohtomo-sensei?"

".....Uh, I heard some dangerous rumors..... Well, I heard the contents of them long before....."

Takahiro spoke vaguely in a bitter tone.

Then, he went silent, staring at the sky. But, "...Dear." He noticed Natsume's anxious gaze because of Chizuru's reminder and hastily put on a wry smile.

"Ahh, sorry, sorry. .....Anyway, I don't know any definite information. I'll tell you clearly after I get a bit closer to the truth."

Saying this, Takahiro regained his normal attitude and started adding shrimp to the grill. His face turned to avoid Natsume's further questioning.

At the same time, it was Chizuru's turn to sigh this time and say:

"It's been more than a year, but we're still unclear. What in the world happened that night."

"People who weren't there probably won't clearly get it no matter how much information we collect. Maybe even the people who were there don't completely understand."

"The people who were there, huh..... It really would have saved us some effort if that kid explained in a bit more detail....."

Chizuru frowned as she spoke. The 'kid' she spoke of obviously referred to Harutora.

When Harutora had entrusted them with Natsume, he had sent a message-bearing shikigami to Yasuzumi. But the contents written on the message were mostly related to Natsume. It seemed that Harutora hadn't had much time either, but they still wished he could have given them a more detailed message.

"Ah, right. Hey dear? About that Momoe Tenma boy you mentioned before. That boy's currently attending the Onmyou Academy normally right now, right? Could we at least hear some information from that boy?"

"I won't say we couldn't..... But we can't act recklessly."

Takahiro still replied cautiously to Chizuru's proposition.

"According to what Natsume said, the Momoe boy seems not to be good at practical skills. Even for his friends, for him to take part in actions provoking the Onmyou Agency would be..... Also, if he were there and knew the ins and outs of the situation, he ought to have been harshly interrogated by the Onmyou Agency. He'll probably be punished if he leaks any information. Supposing that things truly played out that way, we wouldn't be able to protect him."

"You're saying we'll trouble Momoe-kun? Won't it be fine as long as it doesn't get exposed?"

"If you really want to say, then it's true that he won't be punished if it doesn't get exposed..... But as another possibility, consider what if he's being monitored. After all, the opposition ought to have investigated the small matter of Momoe-kun being on close terms with Harutora-kun. It's very possible that the people who might run off to contact Harutora-kun have been marked in order to forestall Harutora.

"Even if a year has already passed?"

"Actually, Kyouko's being closely monitored. Also, as we said right now, it's quite open. There's a tight perimeter kept around her, yet Tenma-kun looks completely open at first glance. That could be viewed as their trap."

"That's why I said it would be fine if it didn't get exposed, no matter what traps or other things there are, right?"

"Don't make it sound that simple, I retired a long time ago, you know?"

The husband smiled wryly at the forceful wife, his large body shrinking back from the grill. Even so, Takahiro's reply could be called humble. It was a fact that he had been inactive for a long time, but Takahiro's power as a Mystical Investigator was still first-class. Actually, the Tsuchimikado family had continued to escape from the Onmyou Agency's hands for more than a year. Even Yasuzumi's outstanding 'divination' was inherently ambiguous and unclear. The biggest reason they had been able to continue living as fugitives was none other than Takahiro's outstanding ability.

"......I'm very sorry."

Natsume interjected the exchange of differing opinions with a gentle attitude.

"I've made you all worry about a lot of things..... But it's alright. No matter what kind of situation Tenma-kun is in, I'll just become a source of trouble if I approach him right now. I don't want to give Tenma-kun trouble."

Tenma was a good person, a boy who thought about his friends. Even if he were pressured, he would respond to her if a friend was relying on him. Even if that would put him in a bad situation.

Tenma, whose parents had died when he was young, lived together with his grandparents from his mother's side. She had heard before that he aspired to become a professional Onmyouji to respond to his grandparents' expectations. If Tenma was also related to this incident, then he was probably being watched by the Onmyou Agency. It would be tragic if something happened to worsen his position and cut off his path to his profession.

Tenma was currently a third-year student in the Onmyou Academy. It was an important time where graduation was upcoming in the spring. She didn't want to trouble him with her own matters.

More importantly..... It had already been close to a year and a half since then.

"Natsume, is that alright?"

Akino suddenly asked. Since she had remained silenct up to this point, Natsume as well as Takahiro and Chizuru showed expressions as if they had been caught off guard.

"Is it alright if you can't see your friends, Natsume? You finally managed to return after so long."

She was just speaking her doubts, a simple question. Because of that, Natsume was unable to swiftly reply and had nothing she could say.

She searched for an appropriate answer but couldn't think of anything. Akino's straight gaze gradually melted Natsume's exterior, loosening her stiffened heart.

In the end, Natsume shook her head, looking lonely.

"I want to see him." Then, she spoke frankly.

"I really want to see him, since he's a friend. I don't know whether Tenma-kun still thinks of me as a friend, but Tenma-kun is a precious and important friend to me. Of course, I want to ask him about Harutora-kun and the others and have him tell me. But before that, I want to meet him and apologize. Also, if he's worried about me..... I want to tell him that 'I'm alright'....."

Akino became more and more sympathetic to Natsume's words of confession. Natsume was the only person Akino could call a friend. She could intensely sympathize with Natsume's feelings of wanting to see an important friend.

"......Dear?"

Chizuru looked at her husband as if wanting to say something. Takahiro scratched his head uneasily again.

"......I understand your feelings, but I'm still opposed to you meeting .....In the end, it's just a potential problem..... But even if the point of contact isn't exposed directly, there is the possibility that Momoe-kun might inform them 'on his own'. It doesn't have to be that Tenma resents you or something, it's definitely still possible that he has to due to certain reasons."

Perhaps as expected of a former Mystical Investigator, Takahiro was very calm. Also, his outlook was very broad. He deliberately went so far as to mention the possibility of Tenma's betrayal to urge Natsume to think about things again objectively.

Natsume didn't plan on underestimating the year-and-a-half of time either. Natsume still trusted Tenma now, but there was no helping it if perhaps her classmate's feelings had changed.

"......T-Then what about a phone call? Is that no good either?"

"Thank you, Akino, but this is enough. I already knew that we can't meet. Please don't concern yourself."

"But..... At least a letter....."

Akino seemed not to have given up. A bitter, difficult expression emerged on Natsume as she prepared to appease Akino.

But--

"......Well, if it's a letter."

"Eh?"

Natsume inadvertently turned to Takahiro who mumbled that sentence. After all, his attitude had been negative until now. She didn't know how to react to his sudden flip in attitude.

But Takahiro shrugged his shoulders and said with a plain face:

"Meeting directly is very dangerous. But if we send a letter - assuming that the contents are of the sort that don't really matter even if they're exposed - then there's no problem. In any case, the Onmyou Agency knew about our existence a long time ago. Of course, it's just 'sending a letter' in the end. A one-way path from here to there--"

Is that okay? Natsume nodded her head at Takahiro, who seemed to be asking this.

"B-But, is that really okay? If that's inconvenient..... Like if it gets traced back to us....."

Even though she was deliberately mentioning her worries, Natsume's expression rapidly brightened. "I won't make that kind of blunder." Takahiro smiled and guaranteed.

"But let me inspect the wording, alright? Also, there's a possibility that the mail will be intercepted. If possible, a method to send the message directly would be more reliable." "Eh? Wait, dear. In that case, won't she end up meeting Momoe-kun?"

"Of course Natsume won't send it. We'll have to ask someone else."

"You're going to entrust it to someone unrelated? But who?"

"That's true, choosing the person would usually be a lot of work in the first place. But fortunately, there's someone suitable."

Takahiro spoke devilishly and mysteriously.

"......Though the Mystical Investigator Yamashiro knows her face, I don't think that a Divine General would be following Momoe-kun around. There were no photographs either, so the Mystical Investigators ought to have gotten practically zero information. Moreover, even just in case, her escaping speed is top-notch. I don't think there will be any problems."

Takahiro nodded, stroking the stubble on his chin. Because of Takahiro's words, Natsume and Chizuru's gazes sharply changed directions to follow his.

"......Huh?"

Akino, who had suddenly become the center of focus and who still hadn't understood those words, tilted her head in surprise and puzzlement.

Part 3

"......Uwah, it's so cold....."

The moment he walked out the entrance, the chilly outdoor air made Momoe Tenma's body shiver.

His breath was faintly white. After Tenma tucked his chin into his scarf, he stuck his hands into the pockets of his coat and quickly left the house.

The house Tenma lived in was around Gokoku-ji[4]. It was an old area with narrow, complicated, criss-crossing alleyways. There were transfer routes in Nagata-cho and Ikebukuro to Shibuya where the Onmyou Academy was, but Tenma normally always walked to Zoshigaya Station and took the train all the way to the central lines. Though the distance was longer by foot, he deliberately chose to walk because he liked walking through the alleyways. But he couldn't help but regret his choice in this kind of frigid morning. Of course, since he did this regularly, he wouldn't change his course because of the cold.

In any case, his body would warm up quickly if he was active. Tenma quickly headed to the station at his normal pace.

A disappointingly dim day was above his head. Around him was a winter scenery lacking color. Maybe the scenery had become dim because he had returned to a plain, ordinary feeling after the 'happy' days of Christmas and New Years. Tenma's brief winter break had ended a few days ago.

But he would have to get used to this ordinary feeling very quickly. After Tenma glanced at his wristwatch to check the time, he hastened his pace.

After walking for a while, he ran across the Arakawa Line track. His view expanded, his vision broadened, and he was able to see the buildings of Ikebukuro. He turned along the track and the entrance to the subway was immediately visible. But at the same time, the wind increased in intensity. Tenma drew back and furrowed his brow at the cold, gusting wind.

At that moment.

"E-E-E-E-Excuse me!"

Tenma stopped in surprise at the sudden, loud apology from next to him.

The one apologizing was a girl about middle-school age. A coat covered her sailor-type uniform and her hair was tied into two pigtails. A rather cute girl who wore glasses like Tenma. But she was an unfamiliar face. Moreover, she was red-faced for some reason.

Tenma couldn't help but look left and right, checking that there were no other people nearby. In other words, this girl was apologizing to Tenma. But why? Of course he had no idea. Rather, his mind couldn't keep up with the abruptly changing situation. "Um....." After Tenma let out an insecure voice, he just stood there, dazed.

Then--

"Um, you are M-Momoe Tenma-san, right?"

"...Ah, yes....."

He replied immediately, feeling shocked this time out of something other than reflex.

After all, this was an unfamiliar girl. But why would she know his name? Or had they met once before? But he ought not to have forgotten metting a girl from another school. Or had she been in ordinary clothing when they met? No, but.....

Confused, he desperately dug through his memories.

However, while Tenma was unsettled--

"U-Um! T-This! P-Please read this!"

That girl thrust her hands straight forward, not looking properly at Tenma's face either.

She gave him a letter. Even Tenma realized the situation when he saw this. But his confusion worsened even further.

"Eh? E-Ehh?"

He looked left and right for no reason again. After all, it was the first time in his life that he faced this kind of situation. Also, they were close to the station. There were people going to work and class passing by at this time. Actually, although the people passing by didn't stop, they all shot Tenma and the girl a glance without exception. One of them - a woman who looked like an office lady - smiled mischievously with an "Oh my, hoho." His chill from before had vanished like an illusion and his face rapidly heated up.

"P-Please! H-here!"

"O-Okay--!?"

The girl suddenly pushed forward the letter. Tenma couldn't help but take it, swept away by her momentum.

Immediately, the girl turned around and ran off down the asphalt road.

"W-Wait--"

Tenma spoke up in a panic, but lost his words there, his eyes wide. That was also because the girl who had given him the letter had instantly slipped into an alley and vanished. An astonishingly fast sprint. Truthfully, Tenma was dumbstruck.

".....W-What's going on?"

He stood there blankly for a moment. A bolt from the blue. In any case, he was more shocked than happy or embarrassed.

His face red, Tenma moved his gaze to the letter dropped in his hands.

A name was written on the pink letter. But he felt inexplicably tense just by holding it. Tenma decided to put it in his backpack for the time being. Then, without any deep intentions, he flipped it over and saw the other side of the letter.

Tenma's expression tensed up, and a tension different from the one before flashed through the eyes behind his glasses.

A small mark was written on the other side of the flipped letter. It was a simple mark. Not one of the heart-shaped marks that were commonly used in love letters.

A star mark. A five-pointed star drawn in one stroke.

Tenma was extremely familiar with this mark - the pentagram.

"....."

Tenma put the letter into his backpack, then walked down to the subway station entrance as if nothing had happened at all.

Chapter 2 - Future and Everyday

Part 1

"Natsume-kun was resurrected..... That's what Suzu-san said, right? And that Harutora-kun was fine?"

"Yes. .....Though she added the phrase 'for now'....."

Tenma nodded and replied to Kurahashi Miyo's confirmation.

The phone call from Saotome Suzu that had reached Tenma's phone from earlier had been cut off after an extremely short dialogue. He was in a state of knowing almost no details at all.

He would use the Taizan Fukun Ritual to resurrect Natsume. Tenma and the others had sent Harutora off with that kind of determination. They had let him go. Hence, they weren't sure about what had happened to him afterwards. They weren't sure whether Natsume had 'truly' resurrected either. They weren't even sure 'what kind of state' Harutora was currently in.

The time had already flown by to six in the morning.

Currently, Tenma and the others were in a Kurahashi family villa in Mejiro - a small, seaside residence. Other than Principal Kurahashi and Tenma, the people present were Ato Touji, Kurahashi Kyouko, Dairenji Suzuka, and the figure of Amami Daizen lying with his back on the sofa.

The night that had jarred the Onmyou Agency and even the magic community had finally given way to the dawn. However, things weren't over. Or rather, this was only the beginning. The people gathered here right now vaguely anticipated this.

The tumultuous night had ended.

But maybe the magic community would give way to an even longer night now.

"......I understand. In any case, there won't be any results even if we think about Harutora-kun and Natsume-kun's situations like this. Rather, we should consider our own matters right now. Think about the future."

The atmosphere in the room sharply tensed up due to the principal's words.

Tenma had told the principal about what the students had done last night and what they had witnessed. Also, it seemed that she had heard all the details from the once-imprisoned Amami. The situation was deeply pressing. After all, the people present had opposed the leadership of the Onmyou Agency.

They had opposed the Onmyou Agency Chief, Kurahashi Genji.

"Excuse me..... Principal? Is Chief Kurahashi truly, um....."

Tenma stammered a question to the principal.

Kurahashi Genji was an important person at the apex of the modern magic community. Not only was he the Onmyou Agency Chief, the Mystical Investigator Chief, and the Exorcist Bureau Chief, he was also a National First-Class Onmyouji holding 'First-Class Onmyou' certifications. He was the leader of the Twelve Divine Generals and had been named the 'current most influential' Onmyouji.

But that wasn't all. He was the current head of the famous Kurahashi Onmyoudou family..... Also known as the principal's son as well as Kyouko's father. He was the relative of two of the people here right now.

But the principal silently acquiesced to Tenma's question. Though she had prepared her heart, Kyouko's face distorted slightly at her grandmother's grim expression.

".....Amami-kun."

The principal moved her gaze to Amami on the sofa.

Amami was the former Chief of the Mystical Investigators. But he had mysteriously disappeared after the Twin-Horned Syndicate sweeping operation - or so it was said. But in truth, he had been locked underground in the Onmyou Agency building until he had escaped last night. It seemed that his treatment had been like torture, and he was extremely weak. Though the principal had urgently treated him, he still couldn't move with his own strength, nor could he speak since his throat was burned. His magical energy was in a perfectly cut-off state especially to block him from using first-class magic.

Even so, his sharp, thorough gaze was still vigorous.

Amami maintained his posture of lying on the sofa as he endured the principal's gaze, lightly moving his chin to express agreement.

At the same time, a spider quietly crawled up his shoulder. A pale blue spider about the size of a thumb. It was a 'Trick Spider', Amami's shikigami.

This shikigami was a test product of Tenma's dead mother and possessed two important strengths. One was that it was able to materialize on its own by absorbing the surrounding aura. The other was that it could be controlled without using magical energy as long as its magic settings were completed beforehand.

It was originally a shikigami that had been formulated to be used by ordinary people who couldn't manipulate magic. Hence, Amami could also use it after his magical energy was completely sealed. Last night, Amami had controlled this shikigami and led the captured Harutora and Tenma, who had snuck into the agency building. Though one of the two Trick Spiders had been destroyed, the other one that had followed Tenma had safely escaped with him.

Then, from the Trick Spider on Amami's shoulder--

"Unfortunately, the Chief's guilty."

Came Amami's voice.

Tenma's eyes widened with a "Huh?". Though the Trick Spider could share vision and hearing with the practitioner, it didn't have the function of making sound. In fact, it had been silent for the whole time it led Tenma around.

"It's my magic." Then, the principal explained in place of Amami.

"Because we had to ask about the situation no matter what. Though it's just a temporary overwrite, I managed to add to the shikigami charm's magic--"

"You can leave that for later, Miyo-chan."

Amami's voice sounded from the Trick Spider on his shoulder again. The gazes of the group focused on Amami.

"As for your doubt from before, it's unfortunate, but that's how it is. I heard it directly from the man himself, so it can't be wrong. Kurahashi Genji - that guy is the culprit who manipulated the Twin-Horned Syndicate from the shadows until now and led to two spiritual disasters from behind the curtain. The Souma faction have joined hands with him."

Tenma and the other students groaned at Amami's cutting assertion.

".....What's his goal? Is it Yakou's resurrection?"

It was Touji who asked this.

His expression was calm, but his eyes were as cold as ice. After a pause, Amami replied, "Not necessarily."

"The fact that he stole the Raven's Coat can be explained away as for Yakou's resurrection. But we can't clearly say that's the man's goal yet. Maybe that's just the individual expectation of the Souma girl. Actually, those guys abandoned the Twin-Horned Syndicate of gathered Yakou fanatics after using them as a stepping stone to spread the jurisdiction of the Onmyou Agency."

"But." Amami carefully continued.

"The Tsuchimikado branch family boy - No, it's more accurate to say the main family boy. In any case, judging by what the boy called Harutora said, that man's goal seems to be to 'continue Yakou's legacy'. .....That said, I know nothing about what the crucial 'legacy' includes. I expect that it's taboo. The Chief's true intent is unclear right now."

Then, Amami showed Touji a rebellious smile.

"I told you before, right? I said that every adult in this world is an old fox. But Kurahashi Genji is the worst of them. It's not easy to completely see through him."

Touji wordlessly nodded at Amami's words. Though Touji had firm self-confidence, he definitely wasn't a fool. He objectively recognized that the enemy was far cleverer than himself.

".....Is 'that man' an accomplice?"

This question came from Suzuka.

Suzuka's expression was stiff. It wasn't just the principal and Kyouko who had 'relatives' involved. The 'man' Suzuka spoke of referred to her - once-dead - father, Dairenji Shidou. The Divine General who had been called the 'Professor' was the mastermind behind the 'Great Hinamatsuri Purification' spiritual disaster terrorist attack. He was a person who had been viewed as the leader of the Twin-Horned Syndicate in the past.

Touji replied to her instead of Amami.

"Yeah, that's for sure. Though I haven't said so yet, that guy was there when I broke into the executive office. In the end, that guy awakened as Yashamaru, Souma Takiko's shikigami. Since Souma Takiko is allied with the Chief, he's naturally on the same side."

Suzuka lowered her head and tightly bit her lip after Touji announced that.

Though Suzuka was a National First-Class Onmyouji, she had obtained 'First-Class Onmyou' qualifications at a young age because her father had strengthened her spiritual power through magical experiments. Suzuka held strong animosity towards her father for toying with her and her brother.

"......Come to think of it now, the Chief and Dairenji were coworkers in the agency. Maybe their relationship started before Dairenji was reborn. Maybe much..... earlier....."

Suddenly, the Trick Spiders' words became unsettled and suddenly cut off. "Amami-kun!?" The principal's face paled and hastily ran forward with Kyouko by her side.

Amami closed his eyes in extreme exhaustion on the sofa. But after Kyouko supported his body, he slowly opened his eyelids.

A weak, bitter smile emerged on his mouth, and he said:

"......Sorry, my consciousness left me for a moment....."

"P-Please don't be so reckless. You have to settle down as much as possible right now--"

Though using the Trick Spider didn't require the use of magical energy, in the end the wounds and fatigue accumulated on the old man's body were extraordinary. Even if he had received the principal's magic treatment, that didn't change the fact that Amami's condition was extremely bad.

But Amami smiled and spoke to the worried Kyouko:

".....Don't be reckless? That's wrong, Kyouko-chan."

In contrast to his frail image, he showed a powerful smile.

"Let me take the opportunity to say that you can't give voice to such 'naive judgments' in the future. Those kinds of worries are the things an 'adult' says to shelter a 'child'. .....All you others listen carefully too, not just Kyouko."

Amami's gaze caught Touji, Suzuka, and Tenma. The feeble and barely-conscious old man's gaze scorched and solidified the children like flowing magma.

"Listen up. You all have to allow me to be as reckless as possible for as long as I'm still living. That's a necessary situational judgment stipulated by a 'standalone Onmyouji'. .....Of course....."

Amami's expression suddenly eased.

But the children shook even more instead after hearing his next words.

"That's if..... you truly plan on opposing the Onmyou Agency."

Touji, Suzuka, Tenma, and Kyouko all went speechless. The blood drained out of the faces of one, and one flushed red in a flash. One clenched his fists tightly, and one gritted his teeth.

But none of them averted their gazes. No matter what choice they made, there was no choice of fleeing.

"They'll be getting into this villa soon too. There's not much time. Just like Miyo-chan said at the start, let's think about the future."

Part 2

The Onmyou Academy, one of the few Onmyouji training institutions in the nation.

To people who held goals of becoming professional Onmyouji, this was a trial to explore the future difficulties along the road. Its curriculum was practically famous, and the difficulty of its practical curriculum was even more special. The power of one who reached the highest, third year could be called practically professional with regard to first-class magic. It was more famous than famous among the knowledgeable in the magic community.

The building of this academy was built in Shibuya, Tokyo. The current academy was a new building constructed four years ago, and had been heavily ruined in June last year. But it had been completely repaired now, and the vestiges from that time had vanished without a trace.

Not only was it a building furbished with the newest equipment, it also had a solemn feel to conform to its half-century of history. To the large number of Onmyouji who had come from this academy, it was a school building that was difficult to forget.

But--

If the past graduates visited the current Onmyou Academy, they might feel a small sense of wrongness within their nostalgia. Of course, the building had a new look, but it wasn't that kind of outer change, but rather a change on the inside - a change in the atmosphere.

At least Tenma thought so.

Maybe he was the only one who felt this. Maybe he was only concerned by such a subtle change because of his experiences. Maybe that was it. Tenma harbored complicated emotions as he looked at the familiar academy building towering before him.

"Ah, Momoe, morning."

"Good morning. It's so cold today~"

A pair of male and female students greeted Tenma before he entered the academy building. Both were in the same grade. "Good morning. It is very cold." He smiled and replied, then the three of them walked into the academy building together.

The academy building's main entrance had two pairs of heavy automatic doors. When the first of those automatic doors opened, Tenma inadvertently looked to the side.

"....."

"Hmm? What's wrong, Momoe-kun?"

"Nothing..... I felt like I've unconsciously gotten used to this scene."

"Eh? Ahh. You're talking about Alpha and Omega?"

The two classmates stopped because of Tenma's words, turning their gazes to the same direction. The space between the pairs of automatic doors. There had been mechanical shikigami to the left and right with the form of komainu before. Alpha and Omega who had once been the door guards of the Onmyou Academy. The shikigami of Principal Kurahashi.

But now, there were no komainu there. As replacements, there were just several shikigami charms framed on the two walls. In an emergency, the teachers would materialize these to defend the academy building. In that sense, it was 'rational' given their function, but Alpha and Omega hadn't purely been guards. They had

kind personalities contrasting with their haughty language, and had been well-liked by the students as the face of the Onmyou Academy.

Most of the students had been sad when the two of them had been taken away. Of course, Tenma was the same.

But before he noticed it, the scene without the komainu had become ordinary for Tenma.

"Come to think of it..... it feels lonesome from time to time."

"The current first-years don't even know Alpha and Omega. Now that I think of that, it feels estranging."

".....That's true."

Other students came in through the automatic doors opening behind his back as he replied briefly. He couldn't just stand there without moving forever. Tenma also passed through the second set of automatic doors, entering the first floor.

Unlike usual, the vast floor had been adorned with ornate decorations. They were red and white-toned, Japanese-styled ceremonial decorations with gold and silver trim. A banner hanging from the ceiling read 'Onmyou Academy New Year's Ceremony' in black letters.

His classmates looked up above their head and said:

"Come to think of it, it's tomorrow."

"That's not it, there's a dress rehearsal this afternoon."

"Really? I can't feel any motivation."

"There's no helping it, there's gonna be a lot of media coming in this year."

The girl shrugged her shoulders at the frowning boy. Tenma also silently looked above.

The New Year's ceremony was an activity where the Onmyou Academy celebrated the new year, just like its name. That said, it had only started being held last January. Its main purpose was more to raise the Onmyou Academy's image in the media than to ceremoniously celebrate the new year. In short, it was propaganda that the Onmyou Academy aimed outside.

The New Year's Ceremony was an activity that had been started last year by the thinking of the previous Onmyou Academy Principal.

Last autumn, Kurahashi Miyo who had been the principal since the academy opened had resigned from her post as Onmyou Academy principal citing health reasons. Her shikigami Alpha and Omega had also left the Onmyou Academy during that time.

The new principal after that was a former Onmyou Agency official who had retired. The Onmyou Academy had 'changed' bit by bit since then. This New Year's Ceremony - or rather, the fact that this kind of activity was being held in the first place could be called proof of that change.

"......But."

Tenma muttered.

"Actually, there were even more students who entered last year. The number of students withdrawing decreased a lot too."

"Hmm? Well, there were indeed a lot of new students last year. But of course the number of students withdrawing decreased. After all, when we were second-years, there were so many unprecedented incidents--"

As the boy spoke with a bitter smile, the girl next to him quietly said "idiot" as is to reproach him. "Ah....." After the boy noticed, his face became awkward.

There were particular students at the center of the 'unprecedented incidents' during the second year of Tenma and the others.

Tsuchimikado Natsume.

Also, Tsuchimikado Harutora.

Tenma's relationship with the two of them had been particularly good. Other than that, he had also always been with Ato Touji and Kurahashi Kyouko before.

The biggest reason the new principal was holding this New Year's Ceremony was to eliminate the bad image lingering in the Onmyou Academy. The New Year's Ceremony could be called a cleanup after Tenma and the others.

"...Let's go."

Tenma smiled and spoke to the two of them, passing through the floor towards the elevator. His classmates glanced at each other and then chased after Tenma.

The boy spoke in a tone meant to change the topic:

".....Come to think of it, it seems like there are more teachers after the vacation. The first-years are saying that."

"Ah, I heard that too. It seems like they're also former Onmyou Agency people too."

"After the principal changed, the number of former Onmyou Agency teachers increased. Well, there were a lot in the first place."

"Even former public servants who started working again?"

"Eh? Who knows....."

Tenma and the others rode the elevator and changed floors to head to their classroom. "Now that you mention it." The girl asked Tenma.

"Momoe-kun, are you not going to enter the Onmyou Agency in the end?"

"Ah, I don't know."

"You still haven't decided? You're as leisurely as always."

"Momoe's home was a shrine or a temple, right? Are you going to continue it after you graduate?"

"No, my family's not....."

Tenma spoke vaguely and uneasily. As expected, the matters that got the most attention among the third years were each other's future plans. But because Tenma still hadn't decided, he couldn't join in the topic.

Tenma's parents had died in an accident when he was still a child. Since then Tenma had been taken in by the Momoe family on his mother's side and had been raised by his grandparents.

Though the Momoe family wasn't that famous, it had been an Onmyouji family for generations. His grandfather and his mother had been professional Onmyouji. In particular, his mother's manmade shikigami inventions had left behind huge achievements. She was a famous person among those related to the professional magic community.

But his bold and daring mother had brought discord to his relationship with his conservative grandparents. After she essentially ran away from home in secret, they had never ended up making up even until her death. The feelings of Tenma's grandparents who had been left behind and Tenma himself who lived with them after he was also left behind were incredibly complicated.

His grandparents didn't speak of Tenma's future path too much. Or, maybe they still held recollections - or perhaps bitter memories - about their disputes with his mother in the past.

But to the left-alone Tenma, his grandparents undoubtedly expected him to become a professional Onmyouji able to succeed the Momoe family. Tenma himself was also grateful to his grandparents and had entered the academy with the goal of becoming a professional.

To become a professional, standalone Onmyouji. That was Tenma's future goal.

It was just that..... what exactly was a so-called 'standalone Onmyouji'?

"Hm~ But, you know? If you don't have the goal of entering the Onmyou Agency, are you thinking about joining some kind of organization? Or working alone?"

"I~diot, no one can do it alone. .....Ah, come to think of it, Nakata was accepted into a magic tool company last year, right? Although there was a condition that he obtained qualifications."

"Eh, what kind? Where? Witchcraft Corporation?"

"It's not a famous place like that. A place that was established just last year. Allegedly, it seems like it was opened by a household of Onmyouji. So it's more like a workshop than a company."

"Hey, that's a bit surprising. For someone of Nakata-kun's power, I'd think entering the Onmyou Agency would be certain."

"He said that it was good because he would be able to work feely there. He even bragged that 'I'll grow the business'."

Though Tenma didn't interrupt his classmates' conversation, he turned an ear out of immense interest.

If it had been established last year, then it was probably a business formed conforming to the Onmyou legal reform from last year.

The magic community had often been accused of being secluded from both inside and out. However, the current Onmyou Agency was continuously pushing for Onmyouji to participate in new areas of society in order to improve that outlook. The Onmyou legal reform was a very important part of that. It greatly alleviated the limitations on magic - along with the limitations related to the Onmyouji who controlled magic.

New magic-related careers would definitely further increase in the future. The demand for Onmyouji in society would gradually increase alongside that trend. It wasn't just the Onmyou Academy. The magic community itself would change in the wake of the Onmyou Agency.

"...In any case, future plans are very important, but I'm just thinking about obtaining professional qualifications for now. I'm still learning and practicing every day until then."

After Tenma said this, it was the turn of the other two to show discontent.

They just happened to arrive at the classroom when Tenma rebutted. But after Tenma called out, "Sorry, I'm going to the restroom," he walked through the hallway alone without entering the entrance to the classroom.

Then--

The moment he turned the corner and entered a blind angle for the rest of the students, he started to stealth himself as naturally as breathing.

Of course, a 'vanishing aura' for a sudden, perfect stealth magic would attract the attention of a keen spirit seer even more easily. He did it bit by bit, in no hurry. He maintained a constant pace, gradually deepening the stealth magic as if he were melding his body in with the air.

He understood in his heart that this was 99% useless worry.

Even so, he had no reason to ignore the remaining 1%.

Tenma's stealth magic had already completely activated before he entered the male restroom. He walked into the restroom like that, entering the deepest stall and closing the door.

He still didn't release his stealth. He closed his eyes, quickly and thoroughly inspecting the surrounding aura.

There was nothing suspicious. Tenma opened his eyes, taking out the letter from his backpack. The letter that had been given to him this morning by the bespectacled girl.

He wordlessly turned the pink-colored envelope over several times to confirm. He couldn't find any magical traces. He opened it and took out the contents.

There was just one sheet of paper.

He first swept over it with a sharp gaze, then slowly read it again.

The name of the sender hadn't been recorded on the message. Nor could he find any clues to trace back to the sender. It wasn't coincidence, she had deliberately concealed herself. Though it had been handwritten, Tenma wasn't familiar enough with this penmanship to know the answer.

More importantly, the contents seemed superficial. Even if this message were given to a third party's hands, they wouldn't be able to grasp any concrete information. Someone who knew about the 'circumstances' to some degree might realize something, but he wouldn't necessarily be able to obtain any more information than the situation. It was a message written after such consideration.

There was just one thing.

The feelings of the person who wrote the letter were deeply conveyed.

And those feelings most clearly pointed to the sender of the letter.

Tenma closed his eyes, silently suppressing the emotions that spilled forth. Then, he checked the letter again, this time paying attention to intent rather than words.

He checked whether there were any hidden words written somewhere. But even though he checked once again, Tenma grasped that there weren't such things. Gratitude and apology were clearly written in the letter, especially the feeling of not wanting to bring Tenma or others trouble. This letter was completely one-sided news sent from the other party.

Even so, Tenma read the letter again several times.

He checked the time with his watch. It would be bad if he didn't return to the classroom soon. Tenma ripped the envelope into fine bits and flushed them into the toilet. Then, after a slight hesitation, he folded the message as small as possible. He took out a shrine protective talisman that he had carried in his bag and opened the bag to put the message inside.

Then, Tenma left the stall and washed his hands, heading to the classroom.

The place that had become the location of the New Year's Ceremony was the magic practice field underneath the academy building.

It had originally been a place used for practical first-class magic skills, but it was the only place that could accommodate the entire student body, and hence it had been used for the entrance ceremony and other things. It was constructed like an athletic stadium, and the arena bordered by magic barriers was also encircled by spectator seating on all four sides. The day of the New Year's Ceremony, only the third-years were on the arena ground. The second and first-years along with the media that had been invited to cover it watched from the spectator seating. The third-years also carried the ceremony forward.

Hence, the final coursework of the day had been canceled for Tenma and the third-year students, and they were having a dress rehearsal to prepare for tomorrow instead.

"Why do ceremonies and rituals have to be so formal? They're so tiring."

"I know what you mean, but isn't it a problem for an Onmyouji to say that?"

'Rituals' like this had been important work of Onmyouji since ancient times. Tenma smiled and advised his classmate about his statement.

The New Year's Ceremony was overall split into two portions. The first half that was held after the principal's greeting was the same as the demonic aura purification that the Onmyou Agency carried out at the end of the year.

But this was just an imitation. The Onmyou Academy's New Year's Ceremony was just held with the goal of 'purifying the evil of the old year and praying for the beauty of the new year'. They ceremoniously carried out the demonic aura purification ritual along those lines. But the process itself had more meaning than the actual effectiveness of the magic ritual. In that sense, it wasn't that far apart from the original work of Onmyouji. As Tenma had said before, conducting rites and rituals were important duties of Onmyouji.

But the highlight of the New Year's Ceremony was the latter half, not the former. After the demonic aura purification ritual, the students summoned shikigami to put on a dance performance.

Unlike the demonic aura purification, the shikigami dance performance had no other magical significance. But the materialized shikigami had unique appearances and beautiful movements. Hence, even if an ordinary person unrelated to magic watched, he would easily understand that it was 'amazing'. In other words, it was propaganda for the Onmyou Academy's skills. Though the news planned on reporting on the present situation, the eye-catching shikigami summoning was also well-received on television.

"In the end, it's more like a simple performance than a ceremony."

One of his classmates said this, and it was actually true. And just like Tenma had said earlier today, this kind of performance was associated with certain outcomes.

In any case, the third-years were split into demonic aura purification and shikigami-controlling groups, carrying out their dress rehearsals individually. Tenma was in the latter, the shikigami controlling group.

Initially, several students in the group who were particularly good at controlling shikigami would summon and control shikigami on their own. The summoned shikigami were different types of self-made simple shikigami and manmade shikigami that they owned themselves. It was the highlight for any spectating practitioner.

But the biggest highlight that they publicized to the outside was the shikigami group dance performance to end the New Year's Ceremony. The students all brought forth a large amount of manmade shikigami together and performed a group dance.

The created shikigami were old-styled general-purpose 'M1 Domestic[5]' and also general-purpose 'M3 Asura'. The former was originally a smaller shikigami, but the size of the latter had been modified and reduced slightly. In the end, there were many, close to fifty in total. The magic practice field arena that had become

the location would be completely covered by shikigami, giving off quite an overwhelming feeling. It was undoubtedly a spectacular dance performance to someone who didn't understand magic at all.

Though the group dance performance was so gorgeous on the outside, actually controlling it wasn't so tough. That was also because the movements of the shikigami had been set up in the spell beforehand.

Even that spell was shared. It looked like people were individually controlling the shikigami just for show, but actually everyone participating just sent their magical energy into a single spell. With that, all of the manmade shikigami would comply with that spell and dance autonomously.

The students just continuously infused magical energy to maintain their materializations, with each student responsible for two shikigami. It wasn't such a burden for third-years of the famous Onmyou Academy.

But--

"Ah, wait wait! Stop. ...Momoe! You're summoning too slow. You're positioned wrong. Do it again!"

"O-Okay. Sorry."

The students' and the shikigami's' movements stopped together because of the practical skills teacher's instructions. Tenma's face reddened as he endured the gazes of the students around him.

Since all the shikigami shared a single spell, it couldn't be fixed part of the way through if one was created too slowly at the start. In other words, once things started they couldn't go back. That was the only difficulty of the group dance performance.

But Tenma didn't make a mistake again afterwards and they started the group dance performance again. Then, the dress rehearsal ended successfully without any particular problems occurring.

"Get a little more energetic, Momoe-kun."

"Your practical skills are still poor even though it's been so long."

"S-Sorry. My timing was off."

Tenma left the magic practice field while apologizing to his teasing classmates. The entire class knew that Tenma's practical skills weren't the best, but everyone also knew of Tenma's gentle personality. Everyone poking fun at him was close to him, and everyone wore smiles.

Today's coursework ended here.

But there were also students who stayed behind in the magic practice field to train their practical skills on their own. Also, there were people who went to the library to study. Everyone was mindful of obtaining qualifications after they graduated.

The Onmyou Academy wasn't just a simple educational institution, but rather a training institution for professional Onmyouji. No matter what path they took in the future, everyone had a goal of obtaining qualifications. Once they reached their third years, the pressure of that imminent reality gradually increased.

"What are you doing today, Momoe? Where are you going?"

"Ah, sorry. I'm going straight back home today."

"Aww. You aren't depressed from your slip-up earlier, are you?"

"That's not it..... W-Well, we can walk together part of the way."

The companions he walked with after school ended were mostly fixed. Tenma chatted with the customary people while deciding to first return to the classroom.

Just like always, the center of the topic was their career paths and obtaining qualifications. They all held the same anxiety and anticipation towards the coming forks in the road. But even so, they actively advanced while laughing with each other.

Spending time with his Onmyou Academy classmates. That was Tenma's ordinary life right now.

Then--

"......Ah."

The conversation stopped after someone made a sound. Everyone's gaze turned in the same direction.

A girl walked towards them from the end of the corridor. She was a girl whose chestnut hair was done up and who possessed beautiful, idol-like looks and figure. Also, she had an aura-like sense of presence that the other students didn't.

Kurahashi Kyouko.

The granddaughter of the previous principal, the daughter of the famous Kurahashi family. She was an excellent student who represented the Onmyou Academy with her lineage, power, and looks. Even in the dress rehearsal from before, where Kyouko had been selected for the shikigami dance performance, she had beautifully controlled two 'Yaksha'.

She was Tenma's friend that he had talked and smiled with every day before.

But right now, Kyouko carried an atmosphere that kept the people around her from getting close. Her excessive standing out and her 'past matters' couldn't help but make one hesitate about approaching her. She herself probably felt that kind of atmosphere, but she didn't try to eliminate it, fully accepting it instead.

As if overwhelmed by Kyouko's atmosphere, Tenma and the others couldn't help but fall silent as they passed through the corridor.

After the distance shortened, it seemed that Kyouko also noticed Tenma. But she didn't particularly react. She just shot him a gaze for at most a moment. Though Tenma met her gaze, he didn't show any particular expression.

They approached wordlessly and passed by each other.

After they passed by, Tenma sneakily looked behind his back, keeping the people around him from noticing. But Kyouko walked through the corridor with no intention of turning around. But what Tenma watched wasn't Kyouko. Rather, it was her back.

It was there.

Though it was dematerialized, there was something that was deliberately unstealthed 'displaying' its presence there.

A shikigami.

It seemed to have been modified quite heavily, but its type was probably a sensory shikigami. A shikigami that closely followed her when she was in the Onmyou Academy. Ostensibly, the Kurahashi family had given her a bodyguard as a precaution. But at least there were very few among her classmates who honestly believed this.

At the same time as that shikigami monitored Kyouko, it silently expressed to those around her that she was being monitored. The existence of that shikigami was one of the reasons the students kept a distance from her.

"....."

That shikigami had begun following Kyouko around since she had returned to school in the autumn of their second year. Tenma was taken aback by the fact that a year had passed since then.

".....Wow, Genius Kurahashi still feels so stifling."

"Should it be called a feeling of pressure or the feeling of a rare mountain flower[6]....."

"She suddenly became mature after that incident happened."

The classmates started frivolously speaking to one another after they pulled a sufficient distance away. But the student who spoke last awkwardly looked at Tenma with an "Ah".

Something similar had happened this morning too. Tenma just replied with the word "yeah" with an unconcerned demeanor, passing through the corridor with his classmates. Not long afterwards, the chatting resumed and Kyouko's business didn't become the topic again.

After returning to the classroom, Tenma parted with everyone and left the academy building alone.

He felt that this was being excessively careful.

Even so, Tenma would still wait until the date changed.

But he wasn't just waiting until the dead of night out of carefulness. He would continue worrying until the final moment. That was since he couldn't determine what would become the trigger or what kind of reactions would come of it. The situation Tenma was currently in surpassed Tenma's processing ability. He wouldn't be able to deal with it if his own actions led to something bad.

More importantly, he had been told 'not to move'.

...No.....

That wasn't right. Tenma thought of the situation back then. When everyone's' future plans had been decided, when Tenma had been commanded to 'wait'. Amami had said this to Tenma, who felt inadequate by just being on standby.

'Do as you like', he had said.

'Youngster, think, think, and think properly by yourself, and then decide', he had said.

Though his tone had been resigned, he had felt first-hand that they weren't that way. In addition, it was more the opposite. At that time, Amami had given Tenma

and the others a definite choice. He had said things like 'Even if you recognize that you're in a situation where you could easily drag everyone in, you still have to act based on your own judgment. That's how you become 'standalone.

Hence..... He had decided.

The thing he had to abstain from the most right now was being 'conspicuous'. But even so, Tenma couldn't and shouldn't ignore the protective talisman clutched in his hand. He thought of the message concealed inside.

Maybe the sender of this letter was satisfied by just handing it over. Maybe she felt that it was fine to withdraw after conveying her gratitude and apology. This was the right thing to do, he convinced himself. Maybe he believed it. In fact, she had written 'I'm alright' on that message. Not 'doing well', nor 'fine', but rather 'alright'.

If she were truly alright, she wouldn't have written that.

Though he respected the 'opinion' of she who had conveyed that she was alright even given her situation, in the end that was just an 'opinion'.

This letter needed a reply.

A reply from Tenma and the others.

"....."

Tenma was currently in a room in his own house. The lights were out and he sat in the chair in front of his studying desk. He had closed his eyes and continued to 'watch' something for close to an hour.

He had noticed that aura about two months after that summer incident had happened. It was a room in an apartment a moderate distance away. Perhaps it had become occupied immediately after that incident. Tenma could notice it because the practitioner whose shikigami was staying there had become careless and had started slipping up with the stealth magic.

Tenma had been questioned about the situation by Mystical Investigators after that incident. But he had returned to his ordinary life disappointingly easily afterwards. Of course, although he didn't believe things were that simple, it had still been a big shock when he noticed that aura. The fact that he was being secretly monitored. He might have fallen into a panic if he hadn't expected it beforehand.

Tenma observed that the shikigami monitored him with even more care than usual.

He had received a letter in full view this morning. If that scene had been witnessed, then the surveillance tonight might enter a different state from usual. He had waited this long in order to clearly distinguish if that were true.

However, Tenma's conclusion was that the state of the surveillance hadn't changed.

...Good.

Tenma slowly opened his eyes.

He was already prepared. His resolve was the same. Tenma rose from the chair, putting on a coat without turning on the lights and taking a backpack with a charm box. Then, he took the simple shikigami charm placed on the table into his hand.

"......Order."

A simple shikigami that looked exactly the same as him was created. Though its appearance was a bit crude, no part of its appearance could be distinguished as out of place by a shikigami monitoring from afar. Simply put, it just needed to have the same aura as he did.

Also, he had understood that the shikigami mainly surveyed the area around his house rather than its interior through his observations up to this point. Upon careful thought, that was natural, as the opponent's target was the people who

would approach him and not himself. The substitute shikigami was just a safeguard.

Tenma sneakily left his room and arrived in the corridor.

The Momoe family house was an old cottage house. The lights in the corridor were already out, and there was no movement. The residence was surrounded by hedges, but there was a back door along with the main entrance. He prepared to enter the courtyard through the kitchen exit and use that back door.

He entered the kitchen, putting his shoes on before he left through the exit. He breathed and then began his stealth.

That moment, the lights in the kitchen were turned on.

The fact that his body moved first when he was surprised was the result of Tenma's secret training through this year and a half. He finished his stealth in a flash and refined his aura into magical energy. At the same time, he spun his body around to face backwards again while pulling a charm out of the box on his waist. It was a fluid reaction that all took place in a single instant. Even the person who turned the lights on was taken by surprise and dumbstruck.

But Tenma didn't release the charm.

"...G-Grandpa!?"

The person standing in the kitchen exit was Tenma's grandfather. Stunned, Tenma maintained his stance of holding the charm, then hastily hid the charm behind his back.

"W-What's wrong? You're not sleeping?"

Tenma questioned his grandfather, desperately putting on a dry smile.

Though his grandfather's expression was shocked for a period of time, it soon returned to the same stern expression as always. Then, he started at his grandson in silence for a while.

He spoke in a solemn tone:

"......That's what I should say. Tenma, what are you doing at this time?"

A legitimate doubt. Tenma maintained his ready-to-run stance, immediately making the excuse, "I was going to go to the convenience store..... I-I got hungry while studying..... Also, I wanted to get my mind off things for a while. I was going to take the time to go out and walk....."

That kind of reason probably couldn't explain how he had snuck around to the back door without turning on the lights. Tenma was extremely tense. His mind had been as calm as the surface of a lake before, but it was now a mess and couldn't work well. His heartbeat just kept accelerating.

The grandfather stared wordlessly at his grandson.

Then, keeping his stern expression, he said:

"......Be careful outside, don't stay out too late."

After saying this, the grandfather turned off the lights and returned to the corridor from the kitchen. Stunned, Tenma watched him go.

...T-That.....

He was so useless for being thrown into a panic so easily even though he had been so cautious. In the end, that was all he could 'handle'. But in any case, he hadn't been questioned any further. That was a great help.

...How troublesome. But that's great.

Tenma breathed deeply once. He calmed his emotions and checked the time again.

Though he had wasted some time, he still had more than enough. He stealthed himself again, finally entering the courtyard through the kitchen exit.

When he returned to the bedroom and quietly closed the sliding door--

".....Was it Tenma?"

He was spoken to like that.

Tenma's grandfather turned his gaze towards where his wife lay in the darkness. His wife moved her body with a rustle, pushing aside the sheets that covered her and propping up her body.

"Did he leave?"

"No, it seems to be different. It looks like he'll probably be back in the morning."

His wife breathed a sigh of relief in the darkness due to her husband's words. Even he felt the same way. Though he had prepared for it, it seemed like in the end he wasn't able to make up his mind whether to stop him or let him go. He was frankly relieved that the problem was resolved without needing an answer from him.

".....Honestly, I was surprised. The moment that kid entered stealth, I practically couldn't see him even though I knew he was there. I turned on the lights as fast as I could - but even so, I didn't see him immediately....."

Though he had been retired for a very long time, he was at any rate a professional Onmyouji. Even to him, his grandson's stealth was astonishingly remarkable.

Also, his grandson had entered a state of being able to use other magic while being stealthed. Moreover, it had been in a brief moment. Casting other magic while putting up stealth was actually quite a difficult thing. His grandson had calmly - after he had clearly been taken by surprise - accomplished it.

He knew that his grandson had been secretly training and honing his skills. Though he had reported poor practical skills grades, he had already noticed that those were just on the surface. But his growth seemed to have surpassed the level of skill that he had imagined.

He held expectations of his grandson's growth and felt happy about it.

But at the same time, the anxiety deep in his heart grew.

Simultaneously casting stealth magic and other magic was indeed a difficult technique, but it wasn't a necessary technique for most Onmyouji. There was no need to master such a technique if one's goal was purely to become a professional. That kind of skill only became necessary for people who were going to use Onmyoudou to 'fight'.

Should he stop him? Should he let him go?

Or was thinking about it just a waste of effort in the first place? Maybe the answer had long since appeared in a place that he couldn't reach.

"......In the end, that child has finally left the house as well....."

His wife murmured a sentence.

The voice that came from the depths of the darkness reflected her optimistic, transparent feelings. But it seemed in addition to loneliness, an equal amount of sadness was hidden in that voice.

A smile emerged on his mouth that always wore a stern expression.

"Even so, this time wasn't a mistake."

He quietly announced that, as if swearing it to himself and the soul who had left the house in the past.

The bedroom was dark and he couldn't see his wife's expression. But he knew about his old wife's illusory smile and her nod of assent.

Part 3

It was six-thirty in the evening. A car entered the entrance to the Kurahashi family residence.

Kyouko, who came out from the backseat, thanked the driver and closed the door.

Then, she entered the residence through the main entrance. "......Hah." She sighed with an expression of letting down a heavy burden.

She looked over her shoulder, but the shikigami that had been closely following her to 'watch' up through before was on standby on the other side of the closed door. The shikigami that the Onmyou Agency - or rather, her father - had prepared monitored Kyouko all the time. But only when she was in the residence was there an exception. She had made him accept that condition with her personal privacy as a pretext. In the end, the entire Kurahashi residence was covered by a tough barrier. There was no reason for a surveillance shikigami.

...How tiring.

The shikigami had been following her around for a year and a half already. In the end, she was used to it, but she wasn't no longer concerned. Although she admitted that she understood that she was the 'precious daughter' of a famous family, she never would have thought that she would be treated like a secluded princess in this way.

Of course, she wasn't being secluded because she was a 'princess'. The reason was the complete opposite.

"Well, it's because I'm a super delinquent girl."

As she snorted, she realized that a maid of Kyouko's home was hastily running over to welcome her.

More than half of the Kurahashi residence maids had been taken in by the Kurahashi family. Their attitudes had become quite estranged after 'that incident'. In short, they treated her carefully like a bomb[7] After superficially greeting that maid, Kyouko headed to her room.

At the start, she had once become impatient and had spoken scathingly to them. But she had stopped doing that very quickly. Because they had showed hurt expressions.

The ones taken in knew about the general incident that Kyouko had been involved in. After all, it was a generally-known fact that Kyouko had been friends with Harutora and Natsume. But they seemed to believe that it had completely been the Tsuchimikados in the wrong, and thought that Kyouko had committed a crime to shield the Tsuchimikados because of their friendship.

Though she felt that it was hard to explain, they understood it that way more out of firm trust in Kyouko's character than worry about her father. That was why they were hurt by Kyouko's satire and shot back sad gazes.

There was no helping it even if she was angry, and feeling bad about herself was also foolish. But it wasn't something she could explain in detail. So it was enough to stay like this. That was what Kyouko thought. This was much better than being turned a blind eye and secretly slandered.

But it would be a lie to say she didn't feel lonely. Both in the residence and the Onmyou Academy, the current Kyouko didn't interact normally with anyone.

"So, I started talking to myself more."

Kyouko quietly said this, but she couldn't even speak up when she talked to herself out of concern for the shikigami outside. Her phone had been seized, and her personal computer had also been taken away. Was she the only one nowadays who was completely 'secluded' like this?

"I'm not cut out for this....."

She smiled and spoke softly, but her voice was even more depressed than she imagined. "No, no." Kyouko shook her head, smiling impertinently and straightening her back.

No matter what anyone said, she had become weaker. Slowly, slowly. But she ought to be able to stay aware and suppress such internal weakness.

Toughly. Cheerfully. Actively move forward. She consciously continued pointing her heart in a lively direction. Kyouko spoke to herself while heading to her room through the long hallway.

She put down her backpack after entering the room, changing her clothes and taking a bit of a break. She relaxed while sitting in the chair and thinking back on each and every thing that had happened today, no matter how trivial.

"......Yeah."

A natural smile emerged on her face and Kyouko faced the desk and started to study.

Though she had been forbidden means of contacting the outside and tools for gathering information, nothing else had changed from before. Rather, she could read things like books on magic unrestricted even if they were very possibly 'improper' to be memorized by a girl. She hadn't been deprived of the use of the defensive shikigami Hakuou and Kokfuu that she had used in the dress rehearsal today either.

Perhaps things of that level wouldn't be any assistance at all to her father. But such things didn't matter. Kyouko was undoubtedly being given the environment to study and raise her power.

Kyouko had recognized and been conscious of the fact that she was the Kurahashi family daughter for the eighteen years up till now and had accumulated training and studies every day.

But she had never studied seriously like the past year and a half. Also, the more she seriously studied, the more painfully she felt how much she 'had to study'. There were truly a blindingly large amount of things she had to learn, more than she could fathom.

Magic was profound and vast. Kyouko had finally started to realize that fact. "Could it be--", Kyouko recalled. Back then - maybe Harutora had felt the 'sensation' that Kyouko was currently feeling after watching the magic battle between Ohtomo and Doman. He had felt the sensation of sincerely facing the world of magic for the first time.

An hour later, her maid came to inform her about dinner. Kyouko stopped studying and headed to the dining room. She ate the food that had been prepared

alone and then returned to her room to continue studying. She continued studying single-mindedly until ten at night.

At ten, the alarm clock that had been set up rang. Kyouko turned off the alarm clock, cleaned up her desk and then left the room.

The place she went was an annex[8] of the residence. It was the place her grandmother currently lived.

She first circled around to the back of the courtyard. Though the sun had set, the various stone lanterns placed in the courtyard were lit. Narrow bamboo stepping stones were hung up into a small stone bridge across the pond that connected to the annex.

The annex was a Japanese-style two-story building. It was a clearly gorgeous building and was fully-equipped for a person to live in. But her grandmother was currently forbidden from taking a single step outside this annex. When she thought of that, more quiet anger directed towards her father spilled forth than what came from her own treatment.

But her grandmother had said herself that 'anger' was an unnecessary emotion for their current selves. Nothing would come of it even if they got angry. All they had to do was calmly and indifferently complete what they needed to do.

The interior of the annex behind the sliding door was brightly lit.

Kyouko called out upon entering the annex. "Grandmother?"

A reply came from the second floor. Kyouko walked up the stairs to the second floor. Her grandmother was facing a Japanese desk in a room on the second floor. After Kyouko entered the room, she turned her head and smiled sweetly.

"Welcome, Kyouko-san. How was your day?"

The same basic dialogue as before. A dialogue completely the same as the ones they had shared before the incidents. Kyouko agreeably replied "The same as always."

"There was just the New Year's Ceremony dress rehearsal in the afternoon. Since the New Year's Ceremony is tomorrow. ...Ah, also, I passed by Tenma in the hallway."

"Oh my, is Tenma-san still doing well?"

"Yeah. Just like always, it looks like he's getting along very well with his classmates."

"That child would definitely be like that. Rather, was he uncomfortable when he passed by you?"

"Because he's the only one living peacefully? Haha. It's Tenma after all, so it's very possible. Well, that's certainly the truth, so I won't be too bothered even if it concerns him."

Kyouko spoke happily, sitting on the tatami in front of her grandmother.

But she checked her grandmother's appearance while giving an account of what had happened today - the condition of her body as well as her mental condition. No matter what, her grandmother was already old. She couldn't ignore the effects of living under house arrest. Also, Kyouko was the only one who could worry about her grandmother right now.

But whether she understood her granddaughter's worries or not, Kurahashi Miyo wore a full, composed smile no different from before. "Then." She said, offering the Japanese-style desk to Kyouko.

Two wooden 'boards' were placed on the small Japanese-style desk. A round board representing 'heaven' was placed directly above a square-shaped board representing the 'earth'. They were Liu Ren boards that had been used by Onmyouji for astrology since ancient times.

"Let's begin, Kyouko-san. Your training to 'read' the stars."

Chapter 3 - Time to Hunt

Part 1

"Let's think about the future."

Principal Kurahashi was the first to speak up after Amami announced this.

"I'll go back."

A calm, composed tone that didn't feel imposing.

"I have to go back in my position. Also, I need to talk with my son."

The principal explained to the students as if she was already done speaking with Amami.

"......Forgive my rudeness."

Touji immediately spoke up:

"I don't think you'll have any breathing room after you talk, you know? Even so, are you going to go back?"

"Yes, that's right, Touji-kun. That's my duty as a mother."

The principal smiled resolutely. "Grandmother....." Kyouko let out a sad voice.

"In the end, I have no other options. After all, I have no chance of winning even if I openly resist. The 'Kurahashi' is a famous family, but my son currently has all of its influence. I would have had some people I could secretly rely on if it were ten years ago..... But now, that's also difficult. With that, I'm essentially useless."

"......Isn't the principal's divination valuable fighting power?"

"Oh my, thank you, Touji-kun. But unfortunately, my strength as a 'diviner' has already vanished for the most part. The biggest proof is that I allowed these events to happen in front of my eyes. I'm truly no use."

The principal maintained her proper posture and spoke honestly.

The principal was a great astrologist who had been called the 'Kurahashi Diviner' in the past. In addition to the magic community, there had even been many people with faith in her from the financial sector, and although she had been in the politically-neutral position of the Onmyou Academy Principal, she had also assisted the development of the Onmyou Agency. She had that kind of a past. Her relationships from that time could be called her greatest 'weapon'.

But when her opponent was her son - Kurahashi Genji - the situation was very unfavorable. Even if she could use her connections for a brief period of time, once he realized them, he would intervene. And afterwards, the pressure of Kurahashi Genji was overwhelmingly more powerful than the plea of Kurahashi Miyo. If the 'positions' of the two people were made public, then the principal's relationships would undoubtedly become completely powerless.

Also, it was a fact that her fate-reading strength as a 'diviner' was already gradually drying up. With that, even the principal herself would have trouble becoming 'fighting power'.

"P-Please wait! If Chief Kurahashi was the mastermind behind the Twin-Horned Syndicate and involved in spiritual disaster terrorist attacks, then why don't we just report it to the authorities? Maybe the police or the government..... Rather, we ought to do that, right? He's a criminal after all, isn't he?"

It was Tenma who said this.

Why weren't they talking about that? Tenma's expression was confused about that. Indeed, that was reasonable - or perhaps even natural - if one thought normally.

But the situation wasn't that simple.

"Unfortunately, we have no evidence, youngster."

Amami spoke again from the sofa to address Tenma's doubt.

"You're Tenma, I believe. That guy's been careful in that regard. After all, even this Amami Daizen didn't catch him at all. Of course, I'm a witness right now, but the opponent will have taken countermeasures already in the time I've been fleeing."

"But not everyone's on Chief Kurahashi's good side. Even if we have no evidence, there are people who would listen to Amami-san's words--"

Amami shot Tenma a look he would give an immature yet pleasant subordinate as he desperately clutched at straws.

But he immediately returned to his stern expression and said:

"For example, Tenma. Supposing I were in the position of the Chief and was reported to the authorities. If I immediately portrayed that person as the leader of the Twin-Horned Syndicate, I would invalidate his credibility. I would fabricate heaps of evidence and witnesses. Also, I'd use magic."

"That--!"

"It's natural, since that man's a 'criminal' after all, right? Also, if magic is used to fabricate evidence and witnesses, the police and the authorities won't be able to see that they're fake. Only a fellow practitioner would be able to see through it - in short, those Mystical Investigators. And Chief Kurahashi is currently the Chief of the Mystical Investigators."

Tenma lost his words because of Amami's merciless proclamation. It wasn't just Tenma. Kyouko showed a look of shock when she heard, and Touji and Suzuka's faces grew bitter.

Things weren't so simple that every problem could be resolved by Amami telling the truth. After all, the opponent was a person who had manipulated Yakou fanatics, the people who used spiritual disasters for terrorist attacks. At this point, he wouldn't hesitate at framing his adversaries. Also, the opponent held the central influence in the magic community. There were no opportunities to defeat him face-to-face.

"Understand? That's what 'opposing the Onmyou Agency' is."

Amami's lecturing words seemed to become heavy. Tenma didn't say anything more, hanging his head in dejection and slumping his shoulders.

The principal smiled bitterly. "Anyways." She pulled the topic back.

"In these kinds of circumstances, even I have no last resorts. Hence, I'll run back to my son's side for now and wait for an opportunity."

This time Touji didn't say anything more. Just like the Principal had said herself at the start, she had no other options.

"......Is that alright?"

Suzuka, who had been silent for a long while, asked. The principal's mouth curved into a smile, never thinking that words of worry would ever have come from her mouth.

"Thank you, Suzuka-kun. But it's alright. I won't be killed even if I return. Yeah. At the most, I'll be forced into seclusion, right? Also, he should be extremely worried about my safety. At least at the current time. ......Isn't that right, Amami-kun?"

"......Yeah. Even the Chief probably doesn't mean to cause anything big. The most appropriate thing to do would be to have you withdraw from the world and obediently go into seclusion."

Amami also expressed agreement with the Principal's opinion.

Though she had given control of the family to her son, Principal Kurahashi was the current Onmyou Academy Principal. Also, although she had withdrawn from the frontlines, she was still viewed as an authority in the magic community. Her position in society was something that even the Chief couldn't ignore.

Also, it would easily raise relevant and unnecessary suspicions around them if the Principal immediately vanished after retiring. In the end, it would be ideal to have

her secretly vanish without anyone knowing. With that, the Chief would probably 'guarantee' her life as long as she didn't rashly resist. In order to keep up appearances.

"But nothing will be guaranteed after a year. First off, your actions will be greatly limited - Or rather, you'll become unable to move freely. You'll have to prepare yourself for that."

"I understand. My son's not naive enough to allow me to obey on the surface but secretly strategize. However--"

Saying this, the Principal suddenly looked at Kyouko. Kyouko met her gaze, completely stiff.

"I'll definitely be permitted the small matter of meeting my granddaughter. Then I'll do the only thing that I can from now on - Kyouko-san, I'll train you."

"Train me?"

The principal nodded at the surprised Kyouko with a straightforward expression.

"Kyouko-san, you have to come home with me."

"B-But."

"Listen, Kyouko-san. Even if you want to do something now, it's not a situation where you can accomplish that just by thinking of something. Even you understand something of that level, right?"

Kyouko swallowed her words, unable to rebut because of the principal's strict voice.

"But you awakened your ability as a 'diviner'. As long as you hone that ability, it will become a powerful strength. It will become your strength to protect everyone and protect yourself."

"......I....."

Kyouko had divined a few short hours ago. That was the bud of an extremely rare ability even considering the entire magic community. The words of Kyouko's divination had pushed Ohtomo out of his confusion, and as a result, liberated their companions from a stalemate.

But Kyouko had immediately lost consciousness afterwards and had already been carried to a different location when she awoke. Though she remembered the strange feeling of divination, on the other hand, it didn't really feel real to her that she had entered such a state.

"Kyouko-san, you will go back with me and continue your past life on the surface while grasping the strength of 'divination'. That will be your 'battle'."

The principal announced resolutely. As if that were her final divination.

Kyouko stared at her grandmother with a face drained of blood.

Then, she clenched her fists in front of her chests and nodded resolutely.

Part 2

The feeling during divination seemed to vary enormously depending on the person. Of course, since there were extremely few people with the power of divination, that was very difficult to say, but at least there were huge disparities in the impressions that Miyo and Kyouko explained to each other.

Miyo's situation was apparently colors. She read the meaning of a bright, vibrant painting. It seemed to be that kind of feeling.

In contrast, Kyouko was light. A different universe overlapped with the reality before her. Letting her spirit float in that universe, she 'saw' the light of her targets - stars.

First, she used the Liu Ren board to stimulate her consciousness.

It was an inexplicable feeling, as if her soul was floating away from her body. She heard the wind roar and was released from all her attachments to the earth, starting with gravity. Kyouko slowly floated in the truly empty world that seemed like a universe overlapping with reality.

An instinctive fear and a burst of liberation as she alone was pushed down from high up in the sky. Excitement and chills spread through her body as she was released from the cage enclosing her.

But Kyouko was as calm as if it were happening to someone else - as if she were in a trance watching a Kurahashi Kyouko whose mind was filled with the same sensations as hers was going through various oscillating emotions. It had that kind of dreamlike, unreal feeling. The room of the residence annex and the boundless, vast universe. Gaps floated between those two worlds, and Kyouko's standards, common sense and knowledge were all twisted askew because of those huge, large-scale disparities. Yin and yang merged.

What was true and what was mistaken? What should she do and what should she desire? Who was she exactly? Kyouko's consciousness expanded and became thin as the sound of the universe's wind swept through her heart.

But--

"Kyouko-san."

Kurahashi Miyo spoke.

Kurahashi Kyouko didn't respond. But Kyouko turned her attention to the voice that called to her. She solidified because of that attention.

"Focus your mind and firmly maintain your consciousness. You can't be swept away. You won't be able to return."

Kurahashi Kyouko and Kurahashi Miyo sat in a Japanese-styled room on the second floor of the annex. Kurahashi Kyouko was sitting in seiza[9] before a small Japanese-styled desk, casting her gaze on the Liu Ren board with a half-awake

expression. Kurahashi Miyo sat to her side, patiently speaking to her granddaughter.

"You don't place yourself in the flow, you create a flow. You can't be engulfed by the sensations that you feel. In contrast, you have to put them under your control. You can't just see things, you have to consciously 'look'."

Kyouko tried to respond to Kurahashi Miyo's instructions. She firmly maintained her 'sense of self' while further departing from the reality before her, turning her gaze towards the depths of the universe. Gaps of space had no meaning there, and even the concept of time was different from normal. Everything was spread out everywhere.

Kyouko's thoughts were reflected in the universe, and she allowed a shadow of the distant reality to appear before her. Perhaps one could say that she condensed everything in the real world and mapped a thumbnail of it. Kyouko gradually looked around the universe with a sensation similar to clairvoyance.

But it was a scenery exceeding human comprehension. Never mind words, it was even difficult to perceive them as images. An overly vague whirlpool of impressions outside of the scope of her understanding. Kyouko gazed at it, desperately trying her best to read the 'meaning' of it.

They should be there. Natsume. Harutora. The stars of the two of them were mixed somewhere in with the swirling universe that Kyouko summoned. But to the current Kyouko, finding them felt as impossible as choosing grains of sand.

The roaring wind of the universe suddenly gained in force.

This again. She was blown flying. Kyouko reflexively resisted, trying to stop, but the strong wind whipped mercilessly and slowly twisted the surrounding universe. Kyouko was also easily picked up by the wind and her consciousness started rapidly fading.

".....Ah."

When she came to her senses, Kyouko was in front of the Japanese-style desk where the Liu Ren board was placed. She was sitting in seiza with her hands on her knees, leaning forwards lightly and staring at the Liu Ren board.

She was dizzy and chilled. Also, her body was astonishingly stiff. But it seemed that she had only lost consciousness for a moment. A year and a half ago when she had divined for the first time, she had fainted and hadn't awakened for a period of time. Anyways, she was already 'used to' this.

Also, she had become able to quite consciously enter the divination state. It was evidence of progress as compared to before.

That said, it hadn't reached the level where she could call it a 'fighting power'.

"You worked hard, Kyouko-san. I'll go make tea right now, so please relax for a while."

Miyo gently patted Kyouko's shoulder, rising and leaving the room. Kyouko's expression was still dazed as she started slowly relaxing her legs from seiza.

After a while, Miyo walked back from the first floor with a tray. Kyouko finally came to her senses when she heard her grandmother sigh after climbing the stairs.

"Ah, sorry. I should have made it....."

"It's alright, my body will quickly become bad if I don't even do this much activity."

After Miyo replied brightly, she returned to Kyouko's side and placed the tray on the tatami. Kyouko hastily pushed the Liu Ren board aside from the Japanese-styled desk and poured green tea from the teapot into the cups that were set out.

Kyouko gingerly pursed her lips and blew the steam from the green tea.

The fragrant green tea seemed to seep into her body. Kyouko's entire body relaxed with a relieved expression.

"Kyouko-san, how was it today?"

Though Miyo asked that, she seemed to have noticed as well. Kyouko shook her head listlessly with a bitter smile.

"No good. It really is difficult to see the stars of people who aren't here."

"Yes. I think it will become easier in the future once you grasp the feeling..... But that alone is something that can't be taught by others."

Miyo spoke regretfully, but she the eyes that stared at her granddaughter smiled serenely. It was so that she wouldn't put any pressure on Kyouko. But to Kyouko, it wasn't very helpful. It had already been a year and a half since Miyo had started giving her special training. She was embarrassed at still being unable to freely control her 'divination' strength.

"Maybe I don't have any talent for astrology."

"Hoho, is that so? The way you think and decide for yourself no matter what is the personality of an astrologist."

"Believing or not believing in astrology has nothing to do with divination, right?"

"Really? Though you can't get fanatic about astrology, isn't it pretty similar how you can feel certain things from the results? Like a hunch about how successful you'll be in the lottery."

"Well, second-class astrology can only be used as a topic for chatting."

"Or like being able to see at first glance what kind of person a guy you meet is--"

"......That can also be called 'instinct'."

Kyouko's shoulders drooped in a dull mood. Miyo smiled at that granddaughter of hers.

"After all, you're very smart, Kyouko-san. But you won't be able to take the last step if you always say only pessimistic things, you know?"

It could be seen that Miyo was still healthy and vigorous from the way she brought up such harsh things with a harmless smile. It felt like the green tea she sipped rapidly increased in astringency.

"It's about whether you can always keep your intuition honed. About how much you can trust that intuition. Divination isn't rational, you know."

Kyouko replied "Yes yes" out of boredom to her grandmother's words.

But the intimate and unreserved conversation still alleviated her heart. Even if it was trivial - no, maybe it was surprisingly touching because it was trivial.

...Honestly, I'm not cut out for this.....

She wanted to hurry up and talk like this with everyone. With Harutora, Natsume, Touji, Tenma, and Suzuka.

For this, she hoped to use the power of divination to find everyone's stars. That feeling was so strong, but.....

"You can't be too desperate, you know?"

Her grandmother rebuked her as if seeing into her heart. Kyouko came to her senses, her face awkward. When performing divination, it was ideal for the body and mind to enrich each other. Being overly pressured or too emotional were counterproductive.

Her emotions had been unstable recently. It was because she was feeling such a long isolation. Even if she understood that unstable feelings would only affect her divination negatively, she couldn't resolve it on a fundamental level. It was difficult. She could only deal with it by being tough, cheerful, and forward-looking like she had thought while returning home.

"Kyouko-san, you have a good feeling of magic as a whole, so you'll immediately become able to use it feely once you get the hang of it. You don't need to be obstinate, nor do you need to be careless instead. Let's continue training."

"......Okay."

Miyo nodded gently to her granddaughter who was slightly embarrassed yet replied sincerely.

But maybe because she had touched her granddaughter's toughness, this time it was Miyo's turn for her expression to darken.

The mood that she had kept uplifted settled down and she inadvertently muttered some words.

"......I'm sorry. I even involved you in such a situation."

"It's nothing. What are you saying at this time, Grandmother. First of all, I was completely implicated from the start whether you involved me or not."

They were unembellished words of truth, but Kyouko also understood that Miyo's troubles weren't about that.

After that incident, Miyo had brought Kyouko back to the residence just like she had said in to everyone in the villa. Afterwards, she and Kyouko's father had a long, one-on-one discussion. Though she had summarized the contents of the conversation to Kyouko, there were probably a good amount of things that she hadn't told Kyouko.

On the other hand, Kyouko almost hadn't been able to speak with her father at all.

Of course, it wasn't that she hadn't been able to meet him. She had met him directly after the incident and thrown out several questions there. That was natural. It was probably the first time since she birth that she had felt so conflicted towards her father.

However, her father hadn't seriously answered Kyouko's questions. Moreover, he had one-sidedly forced her into this state of 'seclusion'. If she hadn't decided to behave obediently towards father for the special training, Kyouko might have been kicked out of the house right there. Of course, she didn't believe she could escape from her father's hands.

Anyways, her father seemed to plan on completely keeping Kyouko from coming in contact with Harutora and Natsume's matters. He expected that she would forget everything about the Onmyou Academy and continue living on as the 'Kurahashi family daughter'. Hegemony ought to have a limit, but it was the truth that Kyouko had no means of opposing him right now. Also, she had no opportunity. Her father didn't ask for his daughter's understanding, nor did he put on a good face.

That was probably the reason Miyo's expression was dark.

Miyo had been thinking in her heart. Thinking that maybe things would have been happier for her granddaughter another way. Thinking that maybe she should have listened to what her father said instead of walking this thorny road, that it might have ended up bringing her to happiness in the end even if she were agonized at the start.

To Kyouko, that was downright ridiculous. She flatly rejected that way of life.

But it seemed that from the point of view of a 'grandmother', Miyo was repeatedly visited by moments of indecision. Her current self was giving off that kind of pathetic atmosphere. If that situation itself were the second-class magic that her father had cast, then it could be called quite the insidious magic.

Also, there was another item related to her father to worry about. Kyouko's divination.

Needless to say, Kyouko hadn't told her father that her 'divination' had awakened. The ability of 'divination' was the greatest and the only trump card of Kyouko and the others. It was the thing that they had to keep him from knowing about the most, the thing that they couldn't let other people know about the most. Also, judging from an observation of her father's attitude, her father still hadn't realized her daughter's awakening - that was what Kyouko and Miyo judged.

But there was a possibility. Amami had warned them of this when they had discussed in the villa. After Amami heard the ins and outs of things from the students, he had confirmed this.

'In other words, that guy Kogure witnessed the moment of Kyouko-chan's divination on the scene, right?'

The National First-Class Onmyouji, Kogure Zenjirou. He had transferred from the Exorcist Bureau to the Onmyou Agency Mystical Crime Investigation Department after that incident. And the current Chief of the Mystical Investigators was her father. In other words, the probability that Kogure had reported on Kyouko's situation to her father was not small. Of course, Kyouko and the others had only judged that her father still hadn't realized after considering that point.....

'You have to be extremely careful. If 'divination' somehow falls into the Chief's hands, it would be hard to deal with.'

Though Kyouko had been restricted in various ways, she had been permitted to meet with Miyo every day. That was why she was able to continue the special training to practice her 'divination' every day.

But if..... What if her father knew about the special training? What if they were playing into her father's hand? That thought was a terror that plucked the tiny bud of hope.

Her father was too powerful an opponent.

".....Ah, right. I had a rare craving for sweets yesterday, so I bought some yokan[10]. There's still some left, we can have them as sweets to go with tea."

Miyo smiled and rose. Stopping Kyouko who hastily rose halfway saying "Let me", she left the room and went down to the first floor.

She wanted to change the atmosphere because of the sudden words of discouragement she had let out. Kyouko also patted her cheeks with her hands, motivating herself again.

...How can I let myself lose.....

Not just her. Tenma, Touji, Suzuka, Harutora, and Natsume were definitely continuing to fight in their own ways. Thinking that way, Kyouko couldn't feel like she was the only one in a poor situation. Kyouko had to continue fighting until the days came when she could leisurely chat and smile with everyone.

But.....

Would that day come?

If she continued fighting, would Kyouko's desire truly become reality? Miyo had wavered just now because she wasn't sure - because she didn't have confidence.

"....."

Kyouko put down the teacup, lowering her face. Her gaze dropped to the tatami, and she blankly stared at the pushed-aside Liu Ren board.

Normally she would be fine.

But occasionally she would hope for 'help'. She wanted to rely on someone who would support her. Someone that she could rely on and have faith in from the bottom of her heart.

Someone who definitely wouldn't succumb to any kind of difficulty, who could accurately break out of any crisis--

In addition, someone who wouldn't lost his calm even in plight--

Someone who could watch and guide their immature selves--

"....."

Just then--

At that moment.

...Huh?

She suddenly noticed. Her consciousness was floating upwards. A vast universe was gradually overlapping with the scenery before her. It was divination. She had unconsciously entered her divining state.

But it didn't have the feeling of the skewed world that she had felt divining up until now. Also, it was too fast. A smooth transition as if she were being absorbed into the universe. It was as if she were being integrated into a series of complicated gears and just happened to fit and turn consistently. She could hear the sound of wind rushing through the universe. But it wasn't the usual roaring sound, but instead a leisurely breeze.

Also, she would 'see' a star.

A star that she knew. A star she had seen once. One of the stars that had been there when Kyouko saw stars for the first time. Ohtomo-sensei, Kyouko called out. "......Ohtomo-sensei." Kurahashi Kyouko murmured. Kyouko desperately focused. Joyful and nostalgic tears welled up in Kurahashi Kyouko's eyes.

But.

...Huh? What?

Like clouds obscuring the moon, hazy darkness covered that star. Darkness that closely followed Ohtomo's star. A huge darkness that completely enveloped the light of the star, yet still had more darkness left over.

An ancient darkness that Kyouko couldn't see through with her eyesight.

...Wait, how.....!

She tried looking again, but she failed. She felt that her condition itself wasn't bad. It was the best up till now. But Kyouko had depleted her spiritual power because of her first divination. She couldn't stop here again.

...Ugh.....!

The star and universe grew distant. Her consciousness was forcefully pulled backwards. Sensei, Kyouko called out. But her voice also dissipated in the wind--

"Kyouko-san! Get a grip!"

When she came to her senses, Kyouko's strengthless shoulders were being held by Miyo.

An unprecedented feeling of certainty lingered inside her body.

Also, the ominous feeling she had observed from the other part.

"......Just now, that was....."

Miyo revealed a relieved expression, understanding that Kyouko's consciousness had successfully returned.

But Kyouko collapsed where she was, unable to move for a period of time.

Part 3

Barstools were messily strewn around the shared Roppongi building.

That man twisted his back, looking behind him several times with an unsettled expression.

Though he wore a plain suit, he had no tie. Also, he hadn't changed his clothes in several days, and he was overall unkempt and somewhat dirty.

But that suited the shop atmosphere even more.

The shop was vast and crowded. Though it was called a bar, it was actually more like a dive. Low background music played in the dimly-lit shop interior, and the laughs of drunken patrons resounded nonstop. The customer base seemed quite delinquent as well. The smell of cigarettes, hair gel, and various other odors filled the area, warmed by the building's ancient heating system. It was a low-class bar that fit the word 'trash heap'.

The man twisted his body several times with an unsettled mood, slowly sipping the beer he had ordered. The man had entered the shop for fifteen minutes

already. The workers at the bar brazenly shot unfriendly gazes towards his listless face, but the man didn't seem to be about to leave.

Then, five more minutes later.

A group of three customers entered the shop. The man at the bar immediately turned his body and looked back.

The three in the group were all male. The two to the left and right were dressed in suits, and only the man in the center had on a gorgeous coat, wearing casual wear to match the shop atmosphere. After noticing the man at the bar, he grinned and approached.

"....."

The man at the bar stared at the approaching three with a solemn look. The three swiftly advanced between the tables, and the two suited men stopped when they got close to the bar. Only the man in the coat smiled again and sat down in the seat next to him.

"Ah, nice to meet you, Priest Kengyou. I'm the envoy from 'Gathering'. Call me Shimoda."

".....What is this supposed to mean?"

"Hah? Ahh, these two? They're just escorts. Please don't get too much on edge."

The man in the coat - Shimoda - smiled and spoke with a flippant tone. But it was only his mouth that was smiling, as a cold light emerged in his eyes. "Tch." Kengyou quietly clicked his tongue, casting his gaze at the two standing men.

".....They're based off of 'Yaksha'?"

After he flatly pointed that out, Shimoda's wicked smile momentarily skipped a beat.

But he immediately spoke with deliberate admiration:

"As expected of a priest from the dark temple. Just as you say, they're 'G2'. Their exteriors were made extremely well, right? But I didn't think they would be seen through at a glance. It might not look like it, but I admit I spend quite a lot of effort on them."

"They're indeed superb. But what meaning is there in deliberately putting your defensive shikigami in human forms."

"Hoho. It's visible at a glance with spirit sight, but our business deals with many ordinary people. If they kept their action-figure[11] appearances, that would give rise to some bad effects. .....I shouldn't have to explain each and every thing to a dark temple practitioner, huh?"

He maintained his smile and the cold gaze he shot over, and his voice also contained disdain.

Kengyou spoke fretfully:

".....I'm the emissary of the temple. I don't usually come in contact with 'work' directly."

"Hah, alright then. But since you wanted to throw yourself into 'Gathering', then you'll have to give that up."

"I understand that sort of thing."

Kengyou spoke resentfully after clicking his tongue again.

The dark temple that Kengyou had once belonged to was formally called Seishuku Temple. It was a Shingon temple that had accepted practitioners since ancient times, as well as one of the representative forces in the 'interior' of the magic community. The people who weren't accepted into the Onmyou Agency's management and people who fled from its grasp. There were also those who had fallen into the dark side of magic and those who used magic outside of the law. Or the people who had lost their paths due to magic karma. That temple was the society where those people who lived in the darkness of the magic community gathered.

However, last year in the beginning of winter, Seishuku Temple had been destroyed by a single Onmyouji - or so it was said. He couldn't say for sure because Kengyou had been outside the temple at the time. Kengyou's occupation inside the temple was to maintain their network of connections in society. Hence, his outside time, which was rare for someone of the monastery, was overwhelmingly abundant. That blessing had allowed him to escape the catastrophe.

The current Seishuku Temple had been taken into the Onmyou Agency's management after its destruction. Most people of the monastery had been arrested or detained. Then, a scant number of people had slipped underground and continued fleeing from the Onmyou Agency's hands. Kengyou was one of them.

Fortunately, Kengyou had the contacts he had cultivated through his maintenance of relationships. He had used the channels from his monastery time and come in contact with another organization. The envoy of that organization was the Shimoda currently in front of him.

The organization Shimoda belonged to was simply called Gathering. Rather than being an organization, it was more like a community of practitioners who would assist each other. The secret organizations of the magic community had powerful senses of loyalty, and in most occasions didn't welcome outsiders. But as for that point, Gathering - which had originally been established by a solo member - was very tolerant of outsiders coming in. Hence, he had been willing to take the risk of slipping into the Onmyou Agency's Tokyo and run here to ask them for aid.

"Well, the relationships are thin anyway, and it happens a lot that useless guys get 'cut off' before they know it. Priest, make sure to pay attention, alright?"

Kengyou nodded resentfully at Shimoda as he specially advised him. What an aggravating man. But now that he had lost the backing of Seishuku Temple, it was unrealistic for Kengyou to continue his escapade from the Onmyou Agency alone. Even if he was somewhat unhappy, all that was left for him was to ask help of Gathering.

Kengyou finished the rest of the beer in his glass cup in order to relieve his resentment.

Just then.

"Found you."

An incongruous female voice suddenly sounded inside the shop.

A slightly nasal, sweet - perhaps even 'sugary' - voice. The customers in the shop almost all inadvertently stopped their conversations, turning their heads in the direction the voice came from. Then, their gazes froze in moments.

A single woman stood at the shop entrance.

To put it nicely, she was 'seductive', or 'avant-garde'. But the woman was several times more 'strange' than that.

First off, she was very tall. She was undoubtedly over 180 centimeters[12] - maybe she was around 190. Also, she was dressed ridiculously scantily, as if mocking the season of early January. At first glance, she looked half-clothed.

Her face was petite, but her head, limbs, and torso were extremely long. Her visible bust and hips were alluringly full, but her waist was astonishingly narrow and tight. Her strapless tube top exposed her abdomen. Though she had on a deep purple jacket right now, the sleeves were rolled up to her wrists and her hands were stuck in her pockets. Below, she wore incredibly short shorts that stuck closely to the sensual curves of her hips. Further below were the contours of healthy, beautiful legs. Those slender straight legs were matched by gorgeously-studded boots.

The customers in the shop - who were essentially all male - were first dumbfounded by her outfit and then finally raised their gazes to look at the woman's face. The woman's hair was raised in a single ponytail and she wore large sunglasses that practically covered half of her petite face. Hence, her face couldn't be seen clearly, but they deepened her glamorous image in conjunction with the lipstick that coated her full lips.

In any case, it was a woman with a very strong impact.

Then, that woman strode out on her long legs and started entering the depths of the store interior.

Step, step. With every stride, her ponytail and the bust in her tube top swayed. Though the gazes of the shop interior were focused on her, she seemed not to care - or even as if she hadn't noticed. Most of the customers watched the woman advance, stunned. Kengyou and Shimoda's eyes were similarly wide.

But not all of them were like that.

"Ah, miss. That's an unfamiliar face. You're alone? Where from?"

A group of two young men sitting at a table stepped on either side in front of the woman to block her path.

Maybe they were already dead drunk, as the faces of the two were red to their ears. They busily swept up and down the woman's body with gazes that completely exposed their inner thoughts.

"You're pretty cute~ Want to have a drink together? I'll treat you to something. Here, sit down."

During the period of time in which one of them was standing in front the stopped her, the other person forcefully hooked his arm around her waist and pulled her to a table. But the man hooked around her staggered slightly for a moment. Though he had tried to pull her forcefully, she didn't budge.

"Eh? W-What, miss? Hey - come here--"

Though he tried to get her to sit at the table again, the woman still didn't move.

The man inviting the woman had a good physique. Though he wasn't as tall as the woman, the man was undoubtedly heavier. Also, since he was drunk, he didn't know how to hold back. However, it was of no use. As if his opponent were a carved rock.

Then, the woman drew her right hand out of her jacket pocket and slowly moved it to her face, pushing her sunglasses to her forehead.

Rounded, childish eyes set with long eyelashes appeared.

"You're in the way."

She spoke with the same sugary voice as before.

"I[13] have business with that guy over there."

After saying this, the woman extended her wrist straight out, pointing to Kengyou at the bar. Kengyou couldn't help but flinch upon suddenly being singled out, his seat scraping and making noise.

"Out of the way."

"Hah? You're so noisy. Listen, sit down. Dammit, you--"

The man got angry as he tried to pull the woman. Those watching next to him could understand that he was using all his strength. However, the woman's feet were motionless as if they were stuck to the ground. "Hey." His companion man noticed the abnormality and spoke to him. Even so, the man still didn't stop.

The woman gazed expressionlessly for a moment at the man trying with all his might to pull her to the table.

Then, she slowly raised her right hand straight up and leisurely swung it out.

A palm.

A full-powered palm strike by a woman with this kind of physique had a power not to be looked down on. But since the drunk man was using too much strength, his balance was upset by the woman's movement and he collapsed to the floor with a thud. Thanks to that, he avoided death.

Boom. The air roared.

The woman's strike whipped up a whirlwind, sending the two men and the table they were trying to pull her to flying. Along with a huge noise was the sound of shattering glass and overturning seats. The table turned a circle and broke on the floor. The cries of the patrons in the shop rang out before the sounds of destruction vanished.

On the other hand, Kengyou and Shimoda's faces paled and they stood up from their seats. They had 'seen' something even more dangerous from the abnormal scene that had suddenly happened.

"What!"

"Demonic aura!?"

The moment the woman had swung her arm, aura that she had suppressed until then had erupted out of her body. And it hadn't been a humans.

Shimoda spoke dumbfoundedly to Kengyou:

"Hey! What the hell's up with that woman!?"

"I don't know! How could I know!?"

Though Kengyou rebutted loudly, the woman had indeed singled him out. She had said she had 'business'. His breathing and heartbeat accelerated in a flash.

The interior of the shop was in an uproar. The patrons scrambled to the exit, and the sound of tables and chairs being knocked over, breaking glass, and the customers' cries echoed loudly. "Damn!" Shimoda cursed, and at the same time, the two suited men - Shimoda's defensive shikigami - stood up next to him and sprinted towards the woman. They tossed away the tables between them, barreling towards the woman and swiftly grabbing her with their momentum.

But even with the full-force collision of the two defensive shikigami, the woman still didn't stagger.

"Dammit! Why are you getting in my way!"

After she roared, she immediately lifted one of the two Yaksha that had collided with her in each arm and swung them out. Stunned, Shimoda doubted his eyes, and then took out charms in a panic. He planned on also using magic himself. Kengyou also came to his senses, reaching his hand towards the charms that he carried.

But out of a corner of his vision, he saw the shop workers escaping into the shop interior. He had a flash of insight. Perhaps there was a shortcut. Kengyou unconsciously chased after the shop workers, trying to escape the scene.

Just then--

"Hey, wait up, boy."

A deep, low male voice reached Kengyou's ears as if it passed through the din. He immediately shifted his gaze and was taken aback again. The farthest seat of the bar. A man had sat down there at some point.

He could say he didn't know when he had sat down because he definitely would have noticed it if this man had been sitting there before the commotion. He was short but abnormally stocky. As if he were a daruma[14]. After polishing off the rum in his hand in a single gulp, he placed it on the bar and turned his stool towards them.

"Did you hear? We have business with you."

The stocky man laughed brusquely.

His hair was red. He wore sunglasses, his nose was pierced, and a thick chain necklace hung from his neck. He wore hip-hop-style clothing. A deep blue outer coat covered his small, fat body along with loose work pants. He wore blue basketball shoes on his feet.

"You're Kengyou of the dark temple, right? Why don't you come with us."

The man requested extremely naturally. He thought it was spirit language for a moment, but it wasn't. But he could feel a high-pressure aura from the voice, and

more importantly from the man himself, and it made him suspect whether it was first-class spirit language.

"O-Order!?"

He immediately released a charm. Though it was a fire-element charm, the magic hadn't been readied properly, and the charm magic only had power. In any case, he resorted to using a smokescreen and tried to take the opportunity to escape.

But--

The man smiled. At the same time, high-density aura was released from the man's body and the magical energy infused into the charm was blown away by the spiritual pressure. Kengyou's mind went blank. No matter how hastily he had used the charm magic, it was extremely abnormal for it to be rendered ineffective purely by the aura from his body. Also, the man's aura wasn't a human's. It was demonic aura.

"I don't plan on eating you or anything. Settle down. .....Or, do you want me to eat you?"

The mouth below the man's sunglasses twisted and he bared his teeth as he spoke. The canines that extended from his lower jaw were strangely long. As if they were fangs.

"O-Oni.....!?"

A mobile spiritual disaster. A Phase Three 'Type-Ogre'. Also, it had a clear consciousness and controlled its own power, so it was undoubtedly a 'true oni' that had existed for extremely long.

"Ahh!? Gozu[15], how unfair! I was the one who found him first!"

"You caused the commotion yourself, Mezu[16]. The Onmyou Agency will be here soon. Don't keep playing around."

The woman who looked in Kengyou's direction shouted with wide eyes. The man wrinkled his face at the woman who had flung away the Yaksha and stomped her feet. As expected, they were comrades. In that case, the demonic aura he had seen from the woman before hadn't been a mistake.

But..... In this case, there were two true oni?

Needless to say, Kengyou had never seen a true oni before. Most of the seniors at the monastery probably hadn't either. What was the implication of there being two at once, and also searching for him? It was like he was in a nightmare.

Then, he suddenly came to his senses and checked Shimoda's appearance, inadvertently moaning. Before he had noticed, Shimoda had already run to the entrance. He hadn't used the two Yaksha to defeat the woman, but purely to buy time. Though that was irritating, it had been an accurate situational judgment. It seemed that he had already been 'abandoned' after their meeting.

Shimoda's back vanished outside the shop, and the two Yaksha also dematerialized soon afterwards. The customers who had packed the tables before had also taken refuge without a single one remaining. The only ones left in the shop other than Kengyou were the two male and female oni.

The man - Gozu - left his stool and blocked the route leading to the shop shortcut with his stocky body. On the other hand, the woman - Mezu - stood there with her arms crossed, unhappily pouting her cheeks like a little kid. The two were no longer trying to conceal their demonic aura. The rising miasma clashed against each other and practically made him dizzy. The background music that still continued playing resounded loudly in his mind.

Just then.

"F-Fuck!?"

He heard the sound of cursing from the shop exit. It was Shimoda. Kengyou turned to look in surprise, and Shimoda who had originally planned on escaping ran back into the shop--

He fell down.

And then he was motionless. What had happened? Right after he thought that--

Thunk. Came a melodious sound.

Thunk, tap, thunk, tap. Melodious sounds approached with a regular pattern. Then--

A man entered the shop.

A man wearing a plain coat. But the moment the man entered the shop, goosebumps rose on Kengyou's skin for some reason. As if the air conditioner in the shop had caused the temperature to rapidly decrease.

The man gave off the feeling of a seasoned veteran, but he actually seemed to be still young. His glasses-wearing face looked even younger than the about thirty-five-year-old Kengyou.

But the man's hair was already almost completely white. Also, the man held a cane in one hand. His right leg was a fake leg, and it was even a wooden fake leg. The melodious sound from before had been the sounds of the cane and fake leg.

"A~hh. I messed up."

After the white-haired man entered the shop, he surveyed the terrible situation and sighed.

"Boss!" Mezu was the first to speak.

"I was the first one to find that guy! I found him!"

Mezu waved her arms and did everything she could to assert that as she moved closer to the white-haired man. The man briefly replied "Okay, okay", entering the depths of the shop with a steady pace and his hand on his cane.

Partway, he turned his head to Gozu and said:

"You've had it tough."

"......Kah. You should say 'Good work' at this kind of time. What a brat who doesn't understand manners."

"Ahh~! Gozu! You have to call that guy 'Boss'. Did you forget Doman-sama's orders?"

"Shut up. I know that! ......Anyway, this guy is Kengyou from the dark temple. The guy who's currently lying over there also called him that, so it can't be wrong."

"Yeah. Thanks."

The man who had been called 'Boss' smiled wryly and thanked Gozu who pointed his chin in Shimoda's direction. Then, he finally moved his gaze to Kengyou.

To be honest, the man's eyes were calm, but not cold or stern. Rather, they were even very gentle.

But Kengyou inadvertently gulped.

He remembered. He recalled that before the dark temple had been destroyed, he had often heard 'certain rumors' in his post responsible for contacting other organizations.

The rumor was that there was a fierce Onmyouji deep within the current magic community. That Onmyouji used three incomparably powerful shikigami, and had redrawn the balance of power in the community in the blink of an eye.

That Onmyouji had a nickname that stemmed from the three shikigami he used and the peculiarities of his body.

Three-leg.

Or by extension, 'White Yatagarasu'[17]

"Nice to meet you, Priest Kengyou. I'm very sorry that things suddenly became like this. Just going by your expression, it seems like you understand me..... my business."

".....Could it be..... White Yatagarasu.....?"

"Ahaha, how overstated. Three-leg is sufficient. Anyway, it's just a simple nickname."

The man - Three-leg - smiled casually.

"Rather, I had a reason for doing this much to visit you, Priest. Actually, I have something I want to ask you. I'm extremely sorry, but could I borrow some of your time?"

"M-Me?"

"Right. It's about the dark temple."

The moment he said that, the eyes deep beneath Three-leg's glasses flashed like a blade's edge. It was chilling.

A one-legged Onmyouji and the two true oni that he led.

Even with how he was, Kengyou was a priest of the dark temple. He had seen a wide spread of the magic community. He also knew of several monstrous practitioners - for example, Priest Jougen.

But this man's terror and sharpness felt different from others.

A hearty, leisurely, and elusive man. But that personality itself didn't give off any particularly dangerous flavor. Rather, he had an inexplicable and sincere atmosphere that made him unknowingly relax his guard even thought he was suspicious.

But the moment he felt that, the air changed. The man's personality didn't change, but the impression he gave off transformed into a chilling killing intent. A hearty, leisurely, and elusive 'danger'. He became an emotionless avatar of death.

Kengyou associated that ominous, detached man with a god of death. Right. Maybe the so-called gods of death were unexpectedly liable to show up for no reason.

"Anyway, our capturing mission has ended. Let's go back and have Doman-sama praise us."

Mezu proudly stood tall behind Three-leg's back. "Yeah." Gozu also nodded in assent from behind Kengyou's back.

"There's no meaning in staying behind for long, so let's retreat with this guy."

Thud. Gozu placed his thick hand on Kengyou's shoulder. It seemed that no one present planned on listening to Kengyou's opinion. Though the other party had said he wouldn't eat him, he felt like a fish on a hook. He didn't feel like he would survive.

Just then.

"Ah, Gozu! Are you going to steal it? That guy's mine!"

Mezu's eyes narrowed when she saw Gozu put his hand on Kengyou's shoulder. Her expression change and she tried to approach Kengyou like a child whose candy had been swiped by someone else.

Before that happened.

"Hey." Three-leg's cane rose up, stopping in front of Mezu's nose. Mezu stopped her foot in midair. "Wait, what are you doing!?" Immediately after she glared at Three-leg:

An impact that seemed to split the world in two passed through the center of the shop.

From the floor to the ceiling.

A slash.

Kengyou was knocked flying with no idea what had happened. Though Gozu immediately caught him from behind, even Gozu's expression had changed. On the other hand, Mezu who had been stopped at the last second widened her eyes and looked at the fissure that the slash had opened up in front of her. Her ponytail fluttered outwards as if it had encountered a sudden wind, and her lengthy body flashed with lag upon enduring the shockwave of magical energy.

After a momentary pause, the shop - the entire building - rumbled and shook. The ground and ceiling had been split open in a flash and dust fell. The tables in the

line of the slash had been split in two - in addition, they had been smashed into pieces.

Amidst all that, Three-Leg had formed a seal with a single hand and avoided the impact with that at the last second.

"......What, we really were being spied on. Even so, what a surprise attack."

He smiled bitterly and turned in the direction of the road.

Then, Ohtomo Jin spoke quietly with a sad - but fearless - expression:

"You're quite anxious for battle, Zenjirou."

The date was about to change soon.

It seemed inconceivable that it was this cold but it hadn't snowed. More importantly, he was in a van stopped in a park. Of course the heat was on, but the frigid air outside still slowly seeped into the floor.

Yamashiro Hayato who sat in the driver's seat checked the time with his watch. Tap. He lightly tapped the steering wheel with his fingertip.

He was a young man who gave off a sharp impression. He wore a light down coat over his simple suit. Though his proper appearance looked rational, they looked slightly arrogant, maybe because of his youth. Though he currently wasn't showing any expression, he seemed to believe that it was extremely stupid to kill time on standby.

Yamashiro glanced at the rearview mirror. He wasn't sure how many times this made it, but the scenery reflected there hadn't changed even after his multiple observations.

Two men sat in the back of the van.

The one sitting in the row behind him was a man who looked around forty years old and whose hair was mixed with white. His body was long and slender, and his

old-styled clothing suited him extremely well. It was just that his face looked quite poor. It didn't look like his body was unwell. His expression was also scarce, and he sat in the backseat with an expression that made one doubt whether he was a corpse, reading a book by the illumination of the car's interior light.

And sitting behind him, in the rearmost row of the van, was a pithy and poignant man of about twenty-five. He was also dressed in a suit. Though he didn't have a tie, something gentlemanly could be felt from his cool and composed atmosphere. Even in his seated posture in the van, his back was straight and it didn't feel like his muscles were relaxed. He was currently crossing his arms and closing his eyes, meditating without a sound. A katana - his trusted blade - leaned against the seat next to him.

The two were Mystical Investigators belonging to the Mystical Crime Investigation Bureau - Yamashiro's coworkers. But the two had a longer history in the Exorcist Bureau over the Mystical Investigators. Moreover, both of them were proud, first-rate Onmyouji of the Onmyou Agency.

Former Special Senser, the 'Divine Eye' of the Twelve Divine Generals, Miyoshi Tougo.

Former Independent Officer, the 'Heavenly Sword' of the Twelve Divine Generals, Kogure Zenjirou.

One was the man who had been valued as having the 'most precious ability in the Onmyou Agency', and one was the man that everyone agreed had been the youngest elite of the Exorcist Bureau. Kogure had transferred from the Exorcist Bureau to the Mystical Investigators because of last year's business, but Miyoshi had just finished transferring last month.

Independent Exorcists were the elites of the spiritual disaster purification teams. Yamashiro was also extremely astonished when Kogure, who had been admired on the frontlines, had been suddenly transferred to the Mystical Investigators. But the entire Onmyou Agency was powerfully shaken when Spirit Senser Miyoshi, who was invaluable to spiritual disaster purification, had transferred outside the Exorcist Bureau. Also, it was completely unexpected that these two would be

teaming with him. Yamashiro himself was also a National First-Class Onmyouji who had obtained 'First-class Onmyou' qualifications. A Mystical Investigator team formed of three Divine Generals was probably unprecedented.

But it was certainly true that the Mystical Investigators currently needed to act this boldly because their talent was insufficient. It wasn't a problem of the number of Mystical Investigators or of lowered quality, but the cases that the Mystical Investigators were responsible for were too difficult and complex. Yamashiro and the others were on standby inside the van this night because of one of those cases.

"......Officer Miyoshi. No movement?"

Yamashiro asked, looking across the mirror.

Miyoshi, who sat behind him, said:

"Yamashiro-shi. I'm no longer a Special Senser. I'm just a Mystical Investigator now."

The huge-name newcomer Mystical Investigator rested his gaze on his book, not planning on raising his face. Yamashiro had acted together with Miyoshi once before he had transferred, when they had gone to visit Seishuku Temple. He also understood his troublesome personality. Of course, it wasn't the kind of problem where just understanding it would make it no longer irritating.

"......Miyoshi-san. Movement?"

"None."

Miyoshi replied flatly to Yamashiro's change of tone. Yamashiro moved his gaze from Miyoshi to Kogure in the mirror.

Maybe specially confirming was an impolite action. But in the end, he still asked.

"......Kogure-san. Is the information that Kengyou is coming in contact with Gathering correct?"

Kogure didn't respond immediately. He remained motionless, still with his arms crossed and eyes closed.

After a pause of three entire seconds, he said:

"Who knows."

Who would have thought he would say 'who knows'. Yamashiro's face became displeased. Kogure clearly ought to be unable to see his expression, but an ephemeral smile flitted across his mouth.

"Unfortunately, I'm not sure about what kind of a person Priest Kengyou is. I can't assert that he won't change his mind at the last moment. .....But in that case, he won't be able to rely on Gathering again. As long as the rumors spread, other organizations will probably drop their plans to bring him in. Of course, he should probably understand this point too."

".....Even so, will he bite? Will he bite this 'bait'?"

Yamashiro asked again.

Though Kengyou was a target that the Mystical Investigators pursued, he wasn't the hunting target of Yamashiro's group. Their target was someone bigger. Kengyou was just bait that they were using to fish for their true target.

But Kogure indifferently replied with a "Not sure."

"If you're just going to talk about trivial things, you might as well take the opportunity to get some sleep."

"It's not trivial....."

Yamashiro responded in a tone that couldn't be called anything but trivial.

It could be said that 'standby' was an important job to a Mystical Investigator. It was just that even though he understood that inside, he still couldn't help that it didn't suit his personality.

Also, the other thing that brought his spirits down was the silence dominating the van.

To be honest, he personally didn't care about Miyoshi anymore. It actually simplified matters if he closed his mouth and read his bock.

But he wanted to talk more with Kogure.

It had already been more than a year since Kogure came to the Mystical Investigators, but for the first one or two months, he had worked with veteran Mystical Investigators who were familiar with Mystical Investigator work, and afterwards he had moved almost solely alone. He had basically never come in contact with Yamashiro.

Yamashiro didn't believe that he was inferior to Kogure as a Mystical Investigator.

But he couldn't match Kogure as an Onmyouji.

It was like how among practitioners, most exorcists and Mystical Investigators were more outstanding than other Onmyouji. Even among the National First-Class Onmyouji, the strength of Kogure who had been an Independent Exorcist also made one feel like he was on a higher level than other National First-Class Onmyouji. Most importantly, Yamashiro, whose experience as a Divine General was still shallow, was interested about exactly what kind of level the other Divine Generals' abilities were and how well he held up in that regard. That wasn't to say he wanted to become close to them, but he did wish to understand them.

But in contrast to how he had been evaluated when he had been in the Exorcist Bureau, Kogure was taciturn and didn't let people approach him after transferring to the Mystical Investigators. He would communicate sufficiently when the job required it, but otherwise he was silent. Actually, some Mystical Investigators who had known Kogure before talked about him as if he had become a different person. Even Yamashiro himself, who was in his team, hadn't had any real conversations with him outside of duty.

He definitely wasn't hard to get along with on the job.

But there were certainly some unpredictable areas about him.

"....."

Tap. Yamashiro stared into the mirror while tapping the steering wheel with his fingertip again.

Just then.

"......Ah, there's movement."

Suddenly - although he still looked at his book - Miyoshi spoke. Yamashiro couldn't help but twist his body and look back into the backseat, and Kogure also opened his closed eyes.

A sparkling, keen gaze stared at Miyoshi in the row in front of him.

"Kengyou?"

"Yes. He entered that building. Just like the information."

"And Gathering?"

"They haven't come."

"......Others?"

"That side hasn't come either. But if practitioners of their level used stealth magic, it might be difficult to notice them."

Miyoshi flatly stated the truth.

Miyoshi was a former Special Senser. He was the Onmyouji with the most prominent spirit sight in the Onmyou Agency. He currently wasn't just purely reading to kill idle time, he was actively using his spirit-seeing ability to 'watch' the surrounding area.

A stealth that he, who saw through stealth as naturally as breathing, would be unable to see through. The ones Yamashiro and the rest were pursuing were practitioners with that much skill.

"Should we go?" Yamashiro questioned Kogure again. Kogure was the one in charge of the team. Kogure replied with "It's not time yet".

"But move the car out. We'll cruise around the area and head out once there's activity."

Yamashiro nodded, starting up the van. Then, he started cruising around the surrounding roads in order to keep from getting far from the building that Kengyou had entered.

Twenty more minutes had already passed since then. Just as Yamashiro was about to start getting impatient:

"...Someone's here."

Miyoshi opened his mouth.

"A practitioner bringing two defensive shikigami. These are Yaksha."

Kogure nodded at Miyoshi's report:

"Someone from Gathering?"

"Probably. He just entered the building."

"Any notable changes in the environment?"

"There's no obvious movement--"

Miyoshi looked up from his book. His eyes were focused on empty air. Kogure's and Yamashiro's expressions rapidly tightened.

"......There's one suspicious presence..... No, there's another one entering the building from the back door. At the least, they aren't humans."

"Yamashiro."

Kogure issued an order and Yamashiro immediately drove the van to the building Kengyou was at. Miyoshi inserted a bookmark and closed the book. On the other hand, Kogure opened the window of the van. He endured the frigid night air that rapidly gusted by, narrowing his eyes and 'watching' the surrounding aura himself.

"...Kokuryuu. Dasai. Reisen. Hou'oubiden. Go to the positions I mentioned before. Don't forget your stealth until I give the signal.

In a brief moment, four auras wavered next to Kogure, flew out the window, and suddenly disappeared into stealth. The crow tengu that Kogure used.

Then.

"......Ah, I just confirmed it. The first presence is a 'Type-Ogre'. The one that entered the building first from the front is giving off demonic aura."

"Which one?"

"A different demonic aura from the one I saw last year in Seishuku Temple. In other words, it's not Kakugyouki."

Yamashiro's hand that gripped the steering wheel became stiff when he heard that.

It wasn't Kakugyouki. Then, the one who had taken the bait was--

"......'Shadow'.....!"

Yamashiro muttered sharply.

'Shadow', or Ohtomo Jin. Though they hadn't met directly, he had heard rumors. He had been the trusted confidant of the 'Divine Fan' Amami Daizen, who had

been the Chief of the Mystical Investigators until the year before Yamashiro entered the Agency, a Mystical Investigator who had subdued the darkness of the Onmyou Agency. A person equivalent to a 'senpai' to Yamashiro's position.

He was currently moving around in the darkness of society under the name 'Three-leg'. He was one of the names listed on the Mystical Investigators' blacklist as a dangerous person along with Tsuchimikado Harutora who was viewed as the reincarnation of Tsuchimikado Yakou.

Kogure took out his phone and dialed it.

"...Chief. It's Kogure. The probability that 'Shadow' appears has gone up. Requesting immediate assistance."

It seemed that the one he was talking to was the current Chief of the Mystical Investigators, or Chief Kurahashi. Kogure hung up the phone after two or three more sentences of dialogue.

Reaching his hand to the trusted blade leaning next to him, he said:

"Yamashiro, we're still not there?"

"We're arriving right--"

Yamashiro's sentence cut off.

Yamashiro - and Kogure - both 'saw' it at the destination the van headed to. The presence of an oni that Miyoshi had sensed. Just like Miyoshi had reported, there were two.

The two oni had both stopped concealing the demonic aura they released. Why? The most conceivable was that a battle had broken out. But never mind Kengyou, even supposing that the practitioners of Gathering were quite powerful, it didn't feel that they could be the opponents of these two oni. Though it was a battle, the victor had already been decided from the start.

Kogure's voice exuded urgency.

"Miyoshi-san! What about 'Shadow's presence?"

"Still none. Either he dispatched shikigami, or he's using stealth."

"Then 'D'?"

"That's also unclear."

Miyoshi's words were calm from start to finish. With perfect timing, the building Kengyou and the others were in showed up through the van's windshield.

An old shared building that contained multiple shops. But several customers were sprinting in a panic out of the first-floor entrance. As expected, a battle had broken out inside. Yamashiro stopped the van near the sidewalk in front of the building.

"What do we do?"

He checked with Kogure.

Kogure replied immediately.

"Attack."

"We're not waiting for support?"

Kogure had already taken his trusted blade and risen from the seat in the time that Yamashiro turned around in surprise. After opening the sliding car door, he jumped down to the sidewalk without looking back into the car. "...Shit." Yamashiro couldn't help but curse as he stopped the engine.

It was a publicly-known matter among the Mystical Investigators that Kogure and Ohtomo had been colleagues. Allegedly, they had been extremely close in private as well. That was why he seemed to hold complex emotions about Ohtomo who had become wanted by the Onmyou Agency. He didn't exactly feel that Ohtomo would accommodate the enemy, but he had to stay on his guard.

He opened the car door and chased after Kogure, leaping to the road from the driver's seat. As he closed the door behind him with a slam, a panicked Miyoshi rolled down the van window and stuck his head out.

"Wait, Yamashiro-shi! If you go too, who's going to protect me?"

"Even the 'Heavenly Sword' will be at a disadvantage against two oni. Leaving him alone is dangerous."

"If leaving someone alone is dangerous, that's the same for me. Or rather, I'm in far more danger."

"Then please wait in the van."

"I can't relax if I'm this close."

"Then come with us."

"Don't be ridiculous."

Miyoshi spoke seriously from start to finish. Though it wasn't the first time being in the same group as him - come to think of it, Miyoshi had been like this from the very start of their trip to Seishuku Temple - but it sapped his motivation. He was already 'on the scene', so he really wished things didn't have to be like this.

But just like Miyoshi worried about, the former Special Senser with his extraordinary spirit-seeing ability was completely useless in a battle. More importantly, it was a battle against true oni, so it was very possible that he would be dragged in and lose his life if he was nearby.

"Then go take shelter in a place that looks safe. If support arrives, please contact them!"

Yamashiro announced this and then circled around the van to run on the sidewalk. Though Miyoshi's whining complaints still came from behind him, he decided not to pay attention.

But immediately after he circled around to the other side of the van, he noticed that Kogure still hadn't entered the building. He stood on the sidewalk in front of the building, looking up at the tall building with a keen expression.

Yamashiro ran up to Kogure's side and said:

"Are we waiting for support as expected?"

"The opponents will retreat immediately once they catch Kengyou. We have to hold them here until support arrives."

"But there's a big gap in fighting power. Other than the two oni, there might be a former Divine General - also, it's quite possible that even an ara-mitama will come out. When a National First-Class Onmyouji is complemented by three other high-level Phase Three, there's a limit to how long we can hold them here.

After he said those words again, he felt how reckless the contents were. After all, even in the 'Hinamatsuri Repurification' that had been a step away from developing into a state of emergency declaration, there had been spiritual disaster purification teams deployed outside the Meiji Outer Garden and they had only been targeting two Phase Three 'Type-Chimera' for purification. Even so, the Exorcist Bureau at the time had faced the situation with full power. Of course, the danger of ancient oni that were already spiritually stable had to be considered differently from Nue who expended not long after they were formed, but they were no less of a threat as 'battle opponents'. No, rather, they were far more dangerous.

Moreover, the Phase Threes that they were going to fight were 'Shadow's shikigami. The difficulty of dealing with spiritual entities being used by an excellent practitioner couldn't be compared to that of simple spiritual disasters.

But.

"I understand. First, I'll get rid of one."

Kogure looked up at the building, readying his blade with an unchanging gaze.

He put his left hand on the still-sheathed sword hung at his waist and leaned forward slightly, reaching his right hand to the hilt. "Hah?" The moment Yamashiro let out a slightly silly sound--

Kogure's aura vanished. No, he had suppressed his aura to keep from being spotted beforehand, condensing it even more tightly.

Then it exploded.

At the same time as the blade was drawn, Kogure's right hand rapidly slashed out, and the blade - the divine blade 'Second Norimune' - flashed.

In an instant, the huge refined magical energy rose into the horizon along with a silver light. The blade depicted a beautiful arc and the magical energy unleashed along the trail burst out with an appalling might.

A spectacular strike as if to rend the world itself. He even had the illusion that the building in front of him was split in two. Yamashiro staggered back a step behind him because of the shockwave and the push of the spiritual pressure. Boom. The building let off a giant crunching sound and a straight crack appeared on the outer wall.

Yamashiro was speechless from shock.

In contrast, Kogure clicked his tongue quietly.

"No way."

Yamashiro came to his senses when he heard this. An attack from such a distant position without warning. Kogure had carried out a surprise attack before even coming in contact with the enemy.

"Let's go."

After Kogure briefly announced this, carrying his scabbard and rushing into the interior of the building. Yamashiro hastily chased after him.

Then, he inadvertently barked at Kogure's back. "How can you do that!?"

"There are ordinary people inside!"

"Don't worry. I only cut the floor the oni were on."

Kogure said indifferently.

The two of them used the stairs instead of the escalator to enter their target floor. Kogure took the lead, with Yamashiro right behind him. The first floor was in a commotion inside the building. Kogure's slash had followed right after the oni had gone rampant. They might believe it was an earthquake or something else. But there was no extra time to lead them to safety. Yamashiro and Kogure dashed up the stairs, their feet making noise.

Just then.

"You did that just now!?"

On the stairs - he immediately doubted his ears - sounded a voice that could only be described as a 'seductive roar'. Then, a tremendous sound of destruction roared above his head, and from the top of the stairs - he couldn't help but doubt his eyes - descended a 'half-clothed tall woman'.

"I almost got cut! Take this, bastard! I won't forgive you!"

Smash. The woman forcefully stomped on the stairs, blocking Kogure's path. She was a ponytailed girl - no, an 'oni'. An astonishing demonic aura was erupting from her entire body.

The oni angrily pounced at Kogure. But Kogure calmly drew his trusted blade, parrying aside the leaping oni with the magical energy on the blade rather than the blade itself.

The oni, whose momentum was parried, collided hard with the wall, crashing right through. The stairs shook because of the impact and Yamashiro instantly grabbed the handrail.

"Kogure-san!?"

"Let's go. Our target is 'Shadow'."

Kogure rushed up the stairs after parrying aside the oni. Yamashiro also tried to follow, but--

"...Don't look down on me!"

The oni who had crashed through the wall returned to the stairs, breaking in between Kogure and Yamashiro and attacking Kogure from behind.

"Tch! Order!"

Yamashiro immediately released a charm. The fire-element charm ignited, scorching the oni. But the oni was unconcerned. Maybe her blood was boiling too much, as she didn't even look at the attacking Yamashiro.

Kogure twisted his body, turning his head and striking with his blade. But this time, the oni avoided the slash. She turned her body to dodge the slash while reaching out a long leg, kicking the stairs under Kogure's feet with a crash.

A large hole was broken open in the stairs because of that blow. But Kogure had already jumped to the step above a moment before.

"曩莫 萨缚 怛他孽帝毗药 萨缚..."

Kogure chanted an incantation, maintaining his sword-holding posture. Fire Realm magic. The flame of magical energy descended towards the oni, who defended herself with her arms. "Hotttt!?" The yelling oni's body flashed with lag. Yamashiro also rapidly switched his charm magic to a wood-element charm. Wood generates fire. The wood aura generated fire aura and aided Kogure's Fire Realm magic.

However.

"Daaah!? Die!"[18]

The oni's body swelled. After she spread her defending arms wide, more demonic aura burst from her body. Kogure's Fire Realm magic was blown away because of that force. Yamashiro in the back immediately put up a barrier to guard against the scattered Fire Realm and demonic aura. But at the same time he guarded against it, he was buffeted by the powerful spiritual pressure.

"Graah!"

The oni bared her teeth and bellowed after throwing off the Fire Realm magic. The air vibrated as if it had been torn open and the stairs seemed about to collapse. Yamashiro couldn't help but tremble as he cursed to himself[19].

There was a mobile spiritual disaster extremely close by in this narrow space. What an overwhelming presence.

"This is... an oni.....!?"

Yamashiro was a Mystical Investigator. His experience fighting spiritual disasters was almost zero. The oni named Kakugyouki had also exerted his strength when Seishuku Temple had been destroyed, but Yamashiro had been locked in a magic battle with Tsuchimikado Natsume in a far-off location. This was his first time facing the might of a 'true oni'.

Also, he feared that she was still restraining herself. Maybe she had been restricted by her master's orders, but even though she had become emotional, she still hadn't used her full power. He could understand this just by 'seeing'.

Kogure rapidly ascended the stairs to pull away from the oni. The oni pursued behind Kogure. Yamashiro hastily prepared to follow, but every step of the oni's had enough force to destroy the stair step. Cracks appeared on the stairs in droves, and it had already turned into something that might collapse at any time.

"Yamashiro, circle around to the shortcut!"

Kogure headed up the stairs while issuing an instruction from above. Yamashiro immediately complied, splitting up with Kogure and arriving in a hallway. It was on the fourth floor.

He had memorized the building's structure beforehand. There was a group mahjong parlor on the fourth floor. It was in a commotion when he entered the parlor, and the people near the entrance shrieked and looked at Yamashiro.

"Onmyou Agency! A spiritual disaster's happened. Evacuate immediately!"

He shouted loudly while rushing to the shortcut within the shop.

But.

"It would be better to back off if you're going to be this noisy."

A man appeared from the opened shortcut door - a red-haired man whose body was abnormally stocky. Yamashiro clicked his tongue and stopped. Demonic aura also showed from the man's body. He was another oni.

"Well, that wild girl is making a riot. Did she get angry because you were taking liberties? We lived in the darkness for a hundred years to keep from trouble others. Don't go asking for it, boy."

The oni wore sunglasses on his face and smiled savagely. He showed his fangs, dripping with dense demonic aura that evoked an instinctive terror.

But he couldn't call himself a Divine General if he faltered here.

"Order!"

A wood-element charm and a fire-element charm. But they didn't generate off each other. The wind whipped up by the wood-element charm blew the flame produced by the fire-element charm, swirling it in front of the oni. A smokescreen. He made a substitute with a shikigami charm as the scattering flame obscured the vision while stealthing himself.

The customers screamed and left their tables to flee outside the shop. He moved, mixing into that commotion. Facing a spiritual disaster head-on wasn't the work of a Mystical Investigator. Moreover, the mission that had been requested of

Yamashiro and the others was to hold 'Shadow' back until support arrived. Winning against this oni would be meaningless if 'Shadow' fled.

The substitute simple shikigami constantly used charm magic. It would carry out feint attacks until the magical energy he had given to it beforehand was depleted. Yamashiro planned on taking advantage of that opening and circling around behind the oni's back.

But his attempt was easily seen through.

"Hey, boy, you'd better back off if you're not going to attack."

The oni warned him in a low voice. At the same time, his read hair fluttered and became messy as his demonic aura swelled in a flash. The oni let his demonic aura erupt everywhere in front of Yamashiro, who had reflexively taken a stance.

"Ugh!?"

An unexpected attack. Yamashiro groaned and staggered as he endured the whipping demonic aura, and the stealth magic he was using was released. But he didn't have the time to mind that.

"O-Order!"

Even if he had lost his balance and was about to collapse, Yamashiro desperately threw a charm behind him. A protective charm. He put up a magical barrier at the last moment in front of the customers flowing out the shop entrance, managing to block the pouring demonic aura. The oni whistled.

"You immediately 'protect' the people even at this kind of time. Though it's admirable how seriously you fulfill your responsibility as a public servant, I don't think you have enough power to worry about others."

The oni grinned at the unstealthed Yamashiro and spoke. Yamashiro immediately righted his stance, but the simple shikigami that he had created as his substitute had already vanished from the demonic aura.

He was completely familiar with battles against practitioners, but in contrast, his intuition was off when his opponent was a spiritual disaster. Never even mind one who had adopted a human form.

Should he try to break through head-on again, or think about other methods?

The oni didn't plan on acting first himself. The two sides began unconsciously glaring at each other.

The thing that broke this stalemate was a huge sound of destruction that echoed above his head along with a tremor that shook the building.

An impact that made one wonder whether the building was about to collapse. As if a bomb had exploded upstairs. But of course, it wasn't a bomb. It was a magical energy shockwave that had descended through the ceiling. It was Kogure.

"Shit! Again!"

The oni clicked his tongue, raising his chin and staring at the ceiling.

But Yamashiro didn't divert his attention from the oni in that moment.

"Bind him! Order!"

With his hands, he rapidly crumpled the shikigami charms that he pulled out from his clothing. Then, black fog spurted out from the gaps in his clenched fist, writhing and rushing towards the inattentive oni as if they were alive. The black fog possessed a feeling of weight like liquefied metal. The oni yelled out, taken by surprise and encircled by the fog.

"Kodoku!?"

That was right. Forbidden magic that had been called a type of curse. The Mystical Investigator Yamashiro who held 'First-Class Onmyou' qualifications had used a piece of forbidden magic according to his own judgment. He admitted that.

Yamashiro entered stealth again. The oni cursed and tried to throw off the kodoku, but the black fog changed form, dissipating and reforming to impede the movements of his body.

"Shit! To think you'd use something so annoying!"

He raged - the moment he saw that, the oni suddenly opened his mouth wide, revealing his fangs, and bit down on the kodoku with a crunch. Crunch, crunch. He bit apart the black fog, puckering his mouth when its movement became slow and sucking it up with a hiss. Hey hey, don't be ridiculous, Yamashiro cursed inside. He hadn't thought it was possible to 'devour forbidden magic'. That was unexpected.

The oni completely ate the kodoku in several brief seconds. But he made it in time. During the period of time when the oni was eating the kodoku, Yamashiro maintained his stealth and ran past the oni, reaching the door connected to the shortcut. "Order!" He released another kodoku for insurance, leaving it as an obstruction and going outside through the shortcut. The place he came out in was an emergency staircase set along the outer wall.

The wind was strong since it faced the back alley. His sweat rapidly chilled upon exposure to the outside air. Yamashiro cast stealth magic again. He rushed up the stairs with the top floor as his target. Judging from what he had seen before, the second kodoku wouldn't buy him much time. He had to take the opportunity to pull away - right as he thought that.

Thunk. A melodious sound rang out--

A man appeared, descending the stairs in front of him.

White hair and glasses. He wore a coat and held a cane, and one of his legs was a wooden fake leg.

"Oh my."

'Shadow' spoke in an incongruously leisurely voice.

"So you got past Gozu. The newcomer's quite excellent this time."

"In other words, Priest. You left a few days before Tsuchimikado Harutora attacked, and hence you weren't at the monastery the day of the attack?"

".....Right. In the first place, I was usually outside more than I was in..... the monastery....."

The emptied bar.

Kengyou, who sat right on the ground with his back against the bar, replied to Ohtomo's question with an unfocused, empty look. Ohtomo crouched on the floor next to Kengyou, continuing the mutter into his ear with a voice containing magical energy.

"There wasn't any unusual situation the days before you left either?"

".....I'm not sure..... At the time, there was just a newcomer to a mountain..... Afterwards, I immediately returned to town....."

"That's the girl called 'Hokuto' that you mentioned before?"

".....Right....."

After Ohtomo sighed, he stood up with an effort, supported by his cane.

He scratched his head with a displeased face, saying:

"I guess it ended up in failure, though I didn't expect much. No wonder the Mystical Investigators left him alone without caring."

Even as Ohtomo spoke to himself, Kengyou who sat on the ground still didn't move, looking absentminded. He had repeatedly used Unmoving Golden Chains, first-class spirit language, and illusion magic, making every effort to extract information. He had originally planned on using gentler means, but unfortunately he didn't have that kind of time.

"It looks like the Mystical Investigators got me this time."

No, more accurately, it was 'Kogure' and not the Mystical Investigators. Ohtomo harrumphed and smiled, then jabbed the ground with his cane. Then, as if a line had been cut, Kengyou lost consciousness and fell to the floor.

However, it hadn't been completely fruitless.

The 'Hokuto' girl that Kengyou had brought up was probably Natsume. There had been a 'dragon-possessed girl' present when Harutora had attacked Seishuku Temple. Ohtomo had received that report from his shikigami. The dragon Hokuto was the Tsuchimikado family guardian beast, along with the servant shikigami that Natsume used. Since true dragons couldn't be everywhere, it was reasonable to think that Hokuto was currently possessing Natsume.

Also, Natsume hadn't come to Seishuku Temple chasing after Harutora, she had arrived the day before. In other words, she had known beforehand that Harutora would appear at Seishuku Temple and had waited. But Harutora acted while completely erasing his traces. Actually, even if Ohtomo used all his means, he couldn't sniff out any information. But then, how had Natsume learned beforehand that Harutora would come to Seishuku Temple?

The biggest possibility was divination. And Kurahashi Miyo and Kyouko were currently placed under Kurahashi Genji's strict surveillance. It was impossible for Natsume to go contact them. With that, he only knew of one remaining 'diviner'. Tsuchimikado Yasuzumi, the head of the Tsuchimikado family.

Natsume's whereabouts had become unclear in addition to Harutora's since the incident last summer. At the start, he had believed she was moving together with Harutora, but after realizing that he had been wrong, he had continued chasing after her whereabouts at the same time as well. Right now it was clear. Though he had anticipated this, he had gained certainty.

Natsume was currently moving together with Tsuchimikado Yasuzumi. Perhaps she was together also with the Tsuchimikado branch family, Tsuchimikado Takahiro and Chizuru.

".....That's good news."

Natsume wasn't Yasuzumi's direct descendant, but it seemed that she hadn't simply been abandoned to become 'Harutora's substitute'. Ohtomo could rest a little easier knowing that the Tsuchimikado clan was next to Natsume.

But on the other hand, that deepened the mysteries regarding Harutora. Natsume had been resurrected. But why was Natsume moving together with Yasuzumi and the others and not with Harutora?

But right now--

"Time's up."

Crash. The floor shook and the building made an inauspicious crunching sound.

The intense impact that came from a floor below approached in the blink of an eye. There was also the demonic aura that Mezu released, along with Kogure's aura. Kogure would arrive here very soon.

His goal tonight had just been Kengyou's information. He had no plans to fight Kogure - or the Mystical Investigators. Thunk. Ohtomo started walking to the shortcut, his fake leg making noise.

But.

"...Oh."

Ohtomo's eyes held an ice-cold light. Immediately afterwards, behind him - the area in Kogure's direction - exploded with a powerful magical energy.

He immediately put up a firm barrier, dropping to the ground with a flip of his coat. Kogure's slash - the blade of magical energy - slashed by as if to brush the top of Ohtomo's head.

The first sneak attack he had used had an upwards trajectory and its power had been suppressed in order to only impact this floor. But this time it was a trajectory that came from the side and below. A slash with full power from start

to finish. The sharp magical energy instantly cut through the shop interior like a guillotine. The automatic doors at the entrance were crushed into fragments, and straight cracks extended through the walls at either side. The impact raged above the head of Ohtomo as he lay on the ground.

"......That idiot, he's planning on cutting the whole building into pieces."

He had probably reached an angle where he could cut this floor because he had gone up the stairs. Then, he had slashed without hesitation. What 'fighting spirit'. Then, it would be hard to completely avoid that wide of an attack if he relying on stealth. Ohtomo quickly rose, his fake leg and cane loudly thumping on the floor.

"...Om marici sowaka."

Kogure's second slash flew over as he chanted Marici's mantra and finished putting up a different type of barriers. Then there was a third. An incomparably powerful slash that didn't even care about ordinary magic walls. But as the interior of the shop was destroyed again, Ohtomo 'deflected' the slashes instead of 'defending' against them. It was the barrier he had used once before against Kagami Reiji. Ohtomo's fake leg thumped in the midst of the fiercely-whipping storm of magical energy and he headed to the shortcut again.

The door of the shortcut was in the deepest area of the shop, so it was barely out of the range of destruction. Ohtomo grasped the doorknob. At the same time, he saw Kogure's aura arrive completely at the floor.

Ohtomo turned the doorknob. Kogure ran to the corridor. Ohtomo opened the door. Kogure arrived in front of the shop.

"Ohtomo!"

Kogure broke into the shop, through the destroyed automatic door.

Ohtomo didn't turn around.

He exited to the emergency staircase, closing the door. In that moment, the magical trap prepared in the bar activated. The magic covered the shop interior and obscured Kogure's aura.

A hidden eight-point barrier. Though it was something that had been prepared 'on the spot', it couldn't be broken out of by strength alone. It would buy him time as he withdrew. Ohtomo stealthed again, taking the opportunity to walk down the emergency staircase.

But when he reached the landing.

Thunk--

His fake leg rang out.

Because a suit-wearing young man had run up to the next landing. After he noticed him, he stopped in shock. "Oh my." Ohtomo murmured bitterly. Though they were both using stealth, it was truly a failure for Mystical Investigators to not have noticed they were nearby until they ran into each other.

"So you got past Gozu. The newcomer's quite excellent this time."

"'Shadow'!?"

In the next moment, a magic flew at him in a flash without an incantation or a hand seal. Unmoving Golden Chains. Though it was just something like a jab, he wasn't a bad choice since they were this close and had just run into each other. Actually, the young man immediately formed a hand seal after he threw out Unmoving Golden Chains. He was preparing for the next magic. He would take the initiative and move on to his true combat magic when he was shaken.

However, unfortunately, Ohtomo was still encircled by Marici's barrier. The young man's eyes widened when he saw Ohtomo deflect the magic. This time, Ohtomo released Unmoving Golden Chains without holding back as if to return the favor. The young man saw that he couldn't completely avoid it and immediately reached out his left hand.

"...Ugh!?"

He exposed his left hand to the magic and used a single hand to weaken its effects. After determining that Ohtomo's Unmoving Golden Chains was the same type as his own, he shielded against it to more or less keep the damage to a minimum. In that time, his right hand swiftly reached into his suit. He was trying to attack. Though that courage wasn't bad, it looked like he was unable to determine the reason his magic attacks were being rendered ineffective. Even if he changed Unmoving Golden Chains to charm magic, Ohtomo's barrier wouldn't break.

But Ohtomo's eyes slightly widened. What the young man pulled out wasn't a charm, it was a pistol.

Also, he fired.

The bullet hit right next to Ohtomo, on the outer wall of the building. "Don't move!" The young man shouted.

"The next one will hit. I'll shoot to kill depending on the situation."

Ohtomo felt great praise for him. This was truly an excellent 'Mystical Investigator'. Objectively grasping the situation, understanding the basis of his duty, and moving accurately.

The more practitioners were caught up with their own power, the more they stuck to using magic and used it as a means to resolve their problems. An ara-mitama that stuck to competitions of magic rather than negotiating and exchanging could probably be listed as a representative example.

But the duty of a Mystical Investigator was to 'resolve' magical problems. Magic was certainly an effective means, but in the end it was just a means - one option. It was more important to have the ability to flexibly respond. In some sense, a bullet could count as 'magic' if the practitioner used it for his goal.

".....You're quite competent."

Ohtomo praised him straightforwardly.

Of course, he knew this young man. Though it was his first time meeting, he had heard rumors of him through his connections. The new National First-Class Onmyouji who had obtained 'First-Class Onmyou' qualifications last year. His name was Yamashiro, as he remembered.

"Don't talk. Listen. I don't plan on being merciful with a former Divine General as my opponent. I'll shoot immediately if you take the slightest action of resistance. First, release that barrier. Then, dematerialize the two shikigami."

"Oh my, I'm sorry--"

Yamashiro fired.

"Don't talk."

"....."

Yamashiro 'watched' Ohtomo without letting up. But even if he 'watched', he didn't meet his eyes, in order to keep from focusing on Ohtomo's aura. He was on guard against illusions mediated by sight or aura. Though he was still young, he had a grasp of the basics.

Ohtomo shrugged his shoulders and raised his hands, releasing the barrier. Yamashiro immediately used his left hand - though his movements weren't fluid - to take out a charm.

"Confuse, seal, close! 唵 嚩日啰 吽 颇吒! Order!"

"...!?"

The charm Yamashiro threw out stuck to Ohtomo's chest. Magic immediately bound Ohtomo and the cane dropped from his hands.

".....This is... a defensive method....."

"Hmph. You can still talk. Pretty good."

Yamashiro smiled coldly.

The charm binding Ohtomo seemed to be Yamashiro's own creation. It was formed from two spells, one of which was a spell that spiritually restrained Ohtomo. But on the 'outside', it was combined with a barrier protection method that belonged to Acala just like Unmoving Golden Chains. It was originally a spell that a practitioner used on himself, a magic that completely blocked off magical effects. In other words, Yamashiro had added a barrier to close Ohtomo inside after binding him with magic.

In that case.....

"In other words, I can't communicate with the shikigami. How unfortunate."

Though he had ordered Ohtomo to dematerialize the shikigami, his true goal seemed to be to cut them off from him. He had deliberately ordered Ohtomo to keep him from taking any other means of resistance, making his thoughts move towards the shikigami. He had made Ohtomo think about how to use the shikigami and take that opening to make the first move and seal his spiritual connection with the shikigami. Though it was a trick with words, it seemed that he understood methods on how to dominate the past of a magic battle quite well.

He had good prospects.

But..... Ohtomo smiled wryly at himself who inadvertently thought of mentioning that.

It had already been a year and a half, but he still hadn't gotten rid of his habits from when he had been a teacher. He would try to coach anyone as long as he thought the person was coachable. Even he was very surprised.

But in the end, Kogure was currently very close behind him.

Also, Yamashiro was an 'enemy'.

".....I'm sorry....."

Ohtomo said the words that had been interrupted just now again.

"The thing about dematerializing, is impossible..... Incidentally, there's no meaning in spiritual disruption....."

"Nonsense. There's no need to think about the shikigami once the master's caught."

First catch the practitioner when facing against a powerful shikigami. That was a theory of magic warfare.

But.

".....That's why."

Ohtomo coldly smiled inside his magic bindings.

"Those two oni..... aren't actually my shikigami....."

"What--"

The hell are you talking about - Yamashiro tried to continue that, but he was unable to.

Demonic aura.

It came from inside the building. But it was directed at him. And very close. When he reflexively jumped aside, the suppressed demonic aura exploded and at the same time the wall between Yamashiro and 'Shadow' was blown outwards from inside the building. It was the oni from before. It seemed that he had changed floors and pursued.

Of course, at the same time Yamashiro jumped aside, he pulled the trigger of the gun in his hand. Tragically, the order was wrong. He should have pulled the trigger first and then jumped, but his body reacted faster than his mind.

Sharp gunfire was mixed in with the rumbling sound of the crumbling building.

'Shadow's figure shook, his expression stiff.

It hit. But it was no use. His raised left forearm was hit. Quite far from being deadly.

Since he was still being magically bound, 'Shadow' fell down because of the shock of the gunshot before the second shot. Then, a head of red hair stuck out from the hole opened in the wall.

The oni turned his face in 'Shadow's direction and said:

"......The bullet hit?"

"......It was off-target....."

"Hmph. Well, since you're not dead, you count as safe according to my master's orders."

"......That doesn't matter, could you hurry up and cut this charm off....."

After the oni shrugged his shoulders, he slipped through the hole he had opened with his body and came to the emergency staircase, annoyedly approaching 'Shadow' and peeling off Yamashiro's charm. Yamashiro gritted his teeth with an "Urgh".

A shikigami absolutely had a master. It could essentially do nothing if the master was taken hostage. But if it didn't have a spiritual link with its master, they wouldn't be able to communicate no matter what - he had perfected his strategy anticipating that. But he hadn't expected that the oni would forcefully attack without concern for the danger it posed to its 'master'. What was up with 'Shadow' saying it wasn't his shikigami? Anyway, it was certain that Yamashiro's strategy had been flipped bottom-up.

'Shadow' who was released from the magic binding used a healing charm to stop his bleeding. He borrowed the oni's shoulder, managing to stand up. In that period of time, Yamashiro changed from his pistol to charms. The pistol was meaningless because the oni was his opponent. But it was debatable whether even

changing to charms would have 'meaning'. Thinking calmly, Yamashiro's chance of victory had completely vanished.

"So what about that guy?"

"Our business is over. Let's withdraw."

'Shadow' replied coldly to the oni's confirmation.

Right afterwards.

"We're not going to kill him?"

The oni looked over his shoulder to glance at Yamashiro as he spoke. A frivolous attitude as if he were asking about lunch. Tension shot through Yamashiro's entire body.

But 'Shadow' spoke coldly again:

"It's alright."

"He's an enemy, you know? You might regret this."

"It's alright. For now, it's not a situation where we have to kill him."

A calm and composed tone that made it hard to believe he had been shot. But the eyes behind his glasses looked cold yet steely.

Right now wasn't a situation where they had to kill him, so they didn't. His words didn't hint at any anger or resentment at the one who had just shot him. On the other hand, he naturally mentioned that he wouldn't kill if there was no need. A calm, Mystical Investigator judgment just like Yamashiro's pulling out his pistol.

But - Yamashiro thought.

Supposing that he was in a situation where he had to kill, he feared that 'Shadow' would have issued the order with the same 'calm and composed tone' as he had now. In contrast, even if Yamashiro's bullets had critically wounded him,

'Shadow' would have undoubtedly ordered a retreat in a 'calm and composed tone'. He didn't show any wavering emotions.

His hair stood on end. That was 'Shadow'. The Onmyouji who had held the identity of the 'Mystical Investigators' Shadow' in the past, whose name was spoken with fear on the inside of the magic community. He had not yet arrived that territory. Yamashiro had to admit that.

"Also--"

'Shadow' borrowed the oni's shoulder, his gaze falling on the cane at his feet. After he stamped on the end of the cane with his foot, the cane jumped up and came back to 'Shadow's right hand.

"We don't have any free time to deal with this kid anymore. That guy's power has increased when we weren't looking.

A dull thud sounded above the heads of Yamashiro and the others as if that were a signal.

The heavy destructive sound of a block of metal being hacked open. Yamashiro immediately looked up in the direction the sound came from. It was right above. Though Yamashiro couldn't see it from his position, he could see aura.

Kogure.

"Haah!"

Kogure, who split open the bar door and jumped onto the emergency staircase, unleashed a slash. Immediately before it hit, the oni carried 'Shadow' and leaped into midair from the emergency staircase.

The landing that 'Shadow' and the others had been was easily fragmented by Kogure's slash. "Yamashiro!" After Kogure descended to the stairs in a flash, he shouted and leaped over the portion he had destroyed. He landed onto a landing below and continued rushing down the stairs towards the ground. Yamashiro, woken up by Kogure's voice, hastily chased after him.

On the other hand, the oni who had leaped into midair descended while carrying 'Shadow'.

"...Hmph."

He twisted his body in midair and kicked the railing of the emergency staircase. He offset the momentum of his fall while changing his trajectory, heading towards the back alley that faced the emergency staircase.

"Haah!"

Kogure swung his sword with one hand as he rushed down the staircase. A blade of magical energy attacked the oni who couldn't dodge in midair. But this time 'Shadow' defended against it with a protective charm. The oni, who was knocked back even more by the force of the slash, landed in the center of the back alley with 'Shadow'.

Kogure, confirming the position of oni and Ohtomo, shouted loudly.

"Now! Deploy!"

A caw from the distant night sky responded to him.

Kogure's crow tengu shikigami. The four crow tengu, who had been waiting for their master's signal, glided over from above to seal off the back alley.

Magical-energy-filled caws resounded back and forth in the back alley. "Ugh!?" Yamashiro's face inadvertently twisted. It wasn't just ear-piercing. The raucous waves of magical energy disrupted other spells, upset the flow of magical energy, and severely lowered the accuracy of magic. In other words, it was magical energy disturbance.

The oni placed 'Shadow' on the road and inhaled loudly. His demonic aura instantly swelled and the surrounding spiritual pressure suddenly surged up.

"YAAAHHH--!"

He roared.

The outer wall of the building cracked as it shook. An oni's bellow, the sound containing magical energy. In terms of might, it seemed comparable to Kogure's slash.

But even so, the crow tengus' surround didn't break.

The shikigami seemed to have gotten quite some spiritual power from their master Kogure beforehand. Their outputs were uncharacteristically high. Also, the crow tengu fought according to their master Kogure's orders, and in comparison, the oni wasn't 'Shadow's shikigami. He was unable to reach his complete potential. Upon observation, one would notice that slight lag had started flashing over the oni's body. The oni itself was also a spiritual entity. The effect of the interference was showing itself.

The crow tengus' interference wasn't a magic that would defeat 'Shadow' and the oni and instantly achieve victory. But just like he had announced at the start, it was extremely effective if used to hold them back until support arrived. Also, this kind of powerful interference was useful against 'Shadow's powerful yet very complex magic spells, while in contrast, it almost didn't affect the magical-energy-filled slashes of Kogure's divine swords. It was a reasonable strategy against an opponent who used precise techniques.

Kogure leaped over several steps, charging down the stairs with all his might. Yamashiro endured the interference while desperately chasing behind Kogure.

Would this work? Just as Yamashiro found hope--

"Arrgh! What is this, it's so noisy!"

A familiar voice came from a floor above. In some sense, it was an even more painful voice than the caws of the crow tengu. It was probably the pony-tailed female oni who had been chasing Kogure. It seemed that she had appeared.

"Mezu! Destroy this thing from the outside!"

The red-haired oni looked upwards and shouted loudly. "Ohh, a chance to show off!" The ponytailed oni replied loudly. Then, demonic aura swelled above their heads this time.

After the ponytailed oni took a bit of a running start, she leaped into the air. "Yah!"

Then, she let out an unbelievable scream that the red-haired oni's bellow couldn't match up to.

Yamashiro couldn't help but stop and cover his ears at this bloodcurdling scream. "Ugh!?" Even the advancing Kogure's pace was thrown off. Of course, that scream also contained powerful magical energy. It was like a curse bomb.

The ponytailed oni descended into the back alley before her after screaming. The interference of the crow tengu was broken, as if overwhelmed by her pressure.

Smash. The ponytailed oni split open the asphalt road. The waiting red-haired oni looked back at 'Shadow' with a "hey".

'Shadow' pressed on his left forearm with the right hand that held his cane. After receiving the red-haired oni's signal, he stepped in a strange pattern that seemed as if he were slowly dancing while keeping that posture. Yamashiro came to his senses and stared in shock.

"Far Step!?"

A high-level magic of 'Imperial Onmyoudou'. He planned on slipping into the spirit flow and escaping from this place. Even so, he couldn't believe that he could perform Far Step wounded and with a fake leg.

"Shit.....!"

As Yamashiro gritted his teeth.

"唵 吠室啰 缚拏野 娑婆诃!"

Kogure clearly chanted Bishamonten's mantra. After changing the way he gripped his trusted blade, he threw it down as if to stab the ground beneath his eyes.

The divine blade infused with all his magical energy turned into an arrow from the heavens that pierced into the asphalt road. A large portion of the asphalt road caved in and cracked radially.

Also, the magical energy carried by the blade continued slipping underground, exploding from the earth. The surrounding asphalt road split open, heaving up like an earthquake. 'Shadow' lost his balance as he performed Far Step and the ponytailed oni fell on her butt. Yamashiro also almost fell off the stairs because of the shaking that assaulted the building.

"......Directly to the spirit flow!?"

Far Step was a long-distance instant movement technique that used the spirit flow. Kogure had suddenly thrown the spirit flow into chaos, impeding the usage of Far Step.

But it was quite a crude action.

"Regroup formation!"

Kogure issued an order to his shikigami while charging down the stairs again. Then, the ordered crow tengu started their interference again. Kogure was going to hold them back no matter what. Yamashiro inadvertently went breathless out of surprise at that resolute will and emotions.

Then, when he reached the second floor of the building, Kogure jumped over the rail and landed directly on the road.

He drew out the sword he had thrown and pointed the blade straight at 'Shadow'.

"...Surrender!"

He declared.

Even though he had continued running with all his might and used several big moves, he still seemed composed.

"....."

'Shadow' didn't respond. He still held his forearm, silently confronting Kogure with an expressionless face. "That guy's so annoying." The ponytailed oni who had fallen on her butt stood up, and the red-haired oni also stepped forward in annoyance as if to protect 'Shadow'. However, Kogure's blade didn't shake an inch before these two true oni.

Yamashiro stopped, preparing charms from across the railing of the second-floor portion of the emergency staircase. He might obstruct Kogure in a close-quarters fight. He judged that he could only support from behind.

Though 'Shadow' was wounded, the opponents ought to have the upper hand in overall fighting power. But if they were just trying to hold them back.....

'Shadow's expression changed.

"Sorry, Zenjirou. Though I really think this is a bit crafty, we're serious too."

What was he talking about? As Yamashiro thought this:

"Hoh. Are you talking about this old man, my lord?"

A child's voice rang out.

The crows' caws echoed raucously in the nighttime back alley. That voice was calm and composed in the midst of the churning aura and magical energy. That alone was hair-raising.

The voice that rang out was from the roof of the building across from them. Yamashiro looked up, his entire body going stiff. A small figure was gazing over from there. He couldn't see very clearly because of the darkness and the distance, it was a boy who was at most an elementary-schooler. He wore suit-like clothing. Also, he wore blood-red sunglasses even in the dark night.

Though it was his first time meeting him, he had naturally heard information about this external appearance. Even supposing that he hadn't heard, he would have been able to conjecture by seeing that ominous aura.

The practitioner 'D' that the Mystical Investigators continued to pursue.

The ara-mitama that called itself the legendary Onmyouji Ashiya Doman.

"Aah--! Doman-sama~! What a charming entrance~"

The ponytailed oni's face brightened and she cheered and waved her arms at 'D'. Even the red-haired oni shouted "Master!" with happiness in his voice. If one was looking, it could be seen that the strength of the two oni clearly increased the moment they noticed 'D' appear. Those oni were the shikigami of 'D', and not 'Shadow'.

"....."

Kogure looked up at 'D' from the road. But he didn't plan on lowering the blade that still pointed at 'Shadow'. His expression was dangerously taught, and his eyes held an intense light.

"Hoho." 'D' smiled happily at Kogure's attitude.

"That's quite something. You, Onmyouji Kogure Zenjirou. It looks like I came at quite a good time. My lord. We're going to 'play' here, of course?"

"...Priest. The spirit flow is disrupted. Please lend me your power. We're going to 'pass through' a bit forcefully."

"What? I just arrived, and you're planning on retreating?"

"Right. .....For now, it's not a situation where we have to fight."

'Shadow' stared at Kogure while speaking calmly.

Those were the words Yamashiro had just heard.

"Hold on, Boss." "You dare to oppose Master?" The two oni both approached 'Shadow' threateningly. But 'Shadow' completely ignored the oni, staring intently at Kogure alone. Kogure also accepted 'Shadow's gaze head-on, not moving his own gaze.

Then, towards 'Shadow's and Kogure's demeanors.

"......Hmph."

'D' said quietly.

"......Fine. I'll have my fun later. Ah. Then at least we should make a magnificent exit, right?"

'D' started slowly chanting an incantation as he announced this. Alongside that, an inky black wind with a viscous feeling of weight started churning around 'D'.

The black wind spread through the dark night, picking up its power in the blink of an eye. Intensely. Intensely. The wind spun into a powerful gust. Then in moments, it turned into a giant tornado. The back alley shuddered because of the out-of-season storm, signs and other things dancing through the air like paper. The Tengu who initially tried their hardest to resist ended up being blown away wailing by the wind.

"Ugh!"

Yamashiro's body also almost floated up, and he gripped the staircase railing tightly. Even Kogure seemed to have become unable to stand. He was down on one knee, sticking his sword into the ground by his feet for support.

In contrast, the two oni readily exposed their bodies to the powerful wind, letting their ponytail and red hair fly about as they cheered fiercely. 'Shadow' was also unaffected by the wind and he started to slowly dance the pattern that had been interrupted before.

The black tornado filled the surroundings with darkness. Brief snippets of the dancing 'Shadow' could be seen through the gaps of the violently-gusting wind.

"Jin!"

Kogure shouted agitatedly. But 'Shadow's steps showed no traces of disarray.

Then--

Suddenly, everything was sucked into the ground.

The wind stopped and the scenery brightened. The great magical energy filling the space dissipated.

Yamashiro surveyed the back alley. Then, he looked across at the roof of the building. He couldn't see 'Shadow', 'D', or the two oni there. They had withdrawn after obtaining their information, just like they had planned from the start.

Kogure stood up, pulling out the sword stuck in the ground.

Kogure silently stared near where 'Shadow' had vanished for just several brief seconds.

Then, he turned and ordered Yamashiro:

"Yamashiro. Let's go get Miyoshi-san and return to the Agency."

His voice and his expression were indistinguishable from when he had been on standby in the van. Yamashiro was stunned for a moment.

Suddenly, he cheered himself up. Then, he cursed "Damn" to urge himself on, nodding back at Kogure.

Tonight's operation had ended in failure. But their mission still continued.

Part 4

Everyone had withdrawn from the shared building that had become the focal point. But although it was the dead of night, this was still Roppongi. After the 'spiritual disaster purification' that the Onmyou Agency carried out ended, a large number of pedestrians gathered, noisily surrounding the building.

A young male mixed in with that group of people left the building.

He had already decided the meeting place beforehand. He went under a traffic light, passed through an intersection, and entered a small alley. He had chosen a road that as few people headed through as possible. The boy's pace looked indifferent at first glance, but he was actually surveying the surrounding presences without dropping his guard. He watched out for prying eyes and paid attention to the surroundings while cautiously walking.

But even so, he didn't seem timid. Rather, he seemed inexplicably imposing and fearless, because that was his nature. He wore a leather jacket with a V-neck sweater. He wore long boots over his thin trousers.

Also, the bandanna tied around his forehead freely tied up his somewhat long hair.

Just then.

"Touji, here."

He stopped because of that sudden voice.

It came from a narrow side road. But there was no one there even when he turned his head. Also, he hadn't seen any particularly suspicious aura.

But a streetlamp stood in front of the side road. Hiss. Something small silently dropped down in front on that light.

That small thing stopped in midair at eye level. It was a thumb-sized spider hanging on a thin strand. Also, the small body illuminated by the light of the streetlamp was pale blue.

The boy - Touji - entered the side road from the sidewalk. Halfway through, the blue spider left its strand and jumped onto Touji's shoulder. But Touji didn't care, letting the blue spider ride its shoulder as he passed through the side road.

"Were you able to meet?"

"No."

"Why, did you not make it?"

"No, I managed to at the end. But it wasn't a situation I could carelessly approach. Watching from afar was the limit. Even so, it took a lot of work to keep from being exposed while approaching."

Touji replied sincerely to the voice coming from the spider riding on his shoulder.

Actually, it would have been impossible to approach if the Divine General Special Senser hadn't left the scene. Even so, the Onmyouji present had all been National First-Class Onmyouji. Their spirit-seeing abilities weren't things that ordinary Onmyouji could compare to. That was why Touji had only been able to approach to a distance where he could see while staying unnoticed amidst such an intense battle.

"I was planning on trying my luck and contacting him if it were only Sensei..... But the Mystical Investigators showed up too. Being noticed by Kogure-san would be a bit....."

"Is that guy seriously doing Mystical Investigator work?"

"It's not that simple. How should I describe it..... he seems possessed."

"Hehe. Quite a clever thing for a living spirit to say."

"Give me a break."

Touji furrowed his brows because of the cheerful voice from the spider. But although his language was courteous, that tone was thoroughly brusque and unruly, just like Touji's style.

That said, the battle before had indeed been on an unprecedented level. Ohtomo and Kogure. Yamashiro was a newcomer to the Twelve Divine Generals. Two true oni, and finally even Ashiya Doman had appeared. It wouldn't have been

strange for one or two buildings to have been knocked over. It was incredible that it had been held back to only this much damage.

"But it looks like Tokyo's become unsafe too, with magical battle suddenly popping out on the street."

Touji said sarcastically to himself.

But Touji who said this was himself fleeing the eyes of the Mystical Investigators and hiding underground. Maybe it was brazen to criticize other people.

"Oh. It's the second floor of the apartment over there. The corner room to the right of the stairs.

Touji entered the building, following the spider's words. It seemed to be an old apartment, as there weren't automatic locks and doors. He passed through the mailbox-studded hallway and climbed the stairs to the second floor.

The mentioned room wasn't locked. He opened the room and entered. He took off his shoes and passed through the hallway.

There seemed to be a living room at the end. Touji opened the door, raising an eyebrow slightly. Never minding the hallway, even the living room wasn't lit. But the curtains weren't pulled over the glass windows showing the balcony, and the light from outside the apartment faintly illuminated the living room.

It didn't feel lived-in - rather, it was clearly an empty room. There wasn't any furniture or appliances. But there was a person in the center of the room.

She was looking at the nighttime scenery through the glass windows. A woman wearing a kimono. Touji shrugged and spoke to her back:

"How about turning on the lights?"

"There are things that can only be seen in the darkness - although it sounds good to say that, the breaker's still flipped. Turning back the electricity meter is also troublesome, so just leave it like this."

It wasn't the woman who replied.

The kimono-wearing woman - a young and delicate beauty - bent over slightly and turned the thing in front of her towards Touji. It was a wheelchair. An old man sat on the wheelchair that the woman pushed.

He wore a slanted bowler and a three-piece Armani suit. A silk scarf was wrapped around his neck. His originally thin body had become even more emaciated since that incident, but a zeal and intellectuality that had never receded emerged in the eyes showing from under the brim of his hat.

He loudly snapped the fan he held in his hand--

Amami's lips curved into a grin.

"How was it? Did you get anything?"

"Unfortunately, nothing particularly new."

"What. You saw Ohtomo and Kogure in combat directly, right? You didn't get anything at all?"

"Yeah....."

Touji grasped Amami's intent from his provocative tone, smiling back rudely.

"That kind of thing really stimulated me. To be honest, my blood was boiling. It was boiling so much that I wanted to jump in and try seeing how far I've gotten now."

"Hehe. Hold off. You still can't even call it a contest at your level."

Though he rebuked him disparagingly, the look Amami gave Touji seemed very satisfied.

"How's the time?"

"If you're thinking about moving, it's about time."

"Alright. Then let's go 'report' a bit. That guy should have heard about tonight's business."

Amami smiled with a slightly mischievous expression.

"That bastard's probably waiting impatiently right now."

Chapter 4 - Those Sharpening their Fangs

Part 1

"I'm going to hide underground from now on. Though I don't know what I can do like that, I can't let them catch me no matter what."

The one who went along with Principal Kurahashi and announced his future plans was Amami, who sat on the sofa. "But....." The principal shot him a worried look due to the words Amami said through the 'Trick Spider'.

"You can't even move or talk on your own..... Hiding and escaping underground is quite reckless."

"Even if you say that, I have no room to choose otherwise. I'll truly be done for if they catch me again. Though I can't tell you not to worry, fortunately I have some connections with the underground world from almost the past half-century. There are a few routes I can trust."

Amami was a pure Mystical Investigator who had climbed to the position of Chief by honing himself on the frontlines. Just like the principal's broad connections in the financial sector, he was extremely well versed with the magic community, especially its underground. It was because he had been in a position for many years where he had suppressed magic criminals and underground organizations that he was so adept with tricks on both the escaping and pursuing sides. There were no practitioners harder to deal with than former Mystical Investigators once they slipped underground.

"Oh, I'm like this after all, so I want an 'underling' until I recover. So Miyo-chan, I have something I want to request of you, could you lend me a high-level shikigami that can move on its own and has magical energy aplenty? For now, it's fine if it doesn't have any fighting power. Rather, it should be low-expenditure and versatile - also, it would be best if it looked human. Are there any suitable shikigami of the Kurahashi family?"

"You mean for it to be responsible for caring for you? That can be done. Exactly that kind of shikigami is in this villa right now. It was originally a shikigami that I entrusted with maintaining the villa - cooking and cleaning are its specialties. It's perfectly suited to assist you when you can't move."

"I'm truly grateful." Amami responded to the principal's words. But the principal's expression still didn't brighten.

"But no matter how much you infuse it with magical energy beforehand, it can't hold much at once. Though it's good at regulating its magical energy expenditure, even so, there are still limits. In the end, it won't last until your body recovers."

There were several bandages wrapped around Amami's forehead at the moment. Underneath those bandages was a giant crossed scar - an 'X' seal. It was a magical seal from the hands of Kurahashi Genji that completely sealed off Amami's magical energy.

Hence, the current Amami couldn't use any first-class magic. In fact, even his spirit-sensing ability was sealed, and he had lost the power to 'see' aura. He wasn't even able to use shikigami or infuse them with magical energy from his body outside of the extremely unique 'Trick Spider'.

Also, destroying that seal was extremely difficult. After all, it was a seal cast especially carefully by the most prominent modern Onmyouji. The only one who could completely remove it was the one who had cast it himself. Even if Amami's physical injuries had recovered to some degree through Onmyou treatment, regaining his magical abilities was impossible at the moment.

"All we can do is take it step by step. Or maybe I can have someone supplement it with magical energy; I'll think of a way. Rather, I can only think of a way."

A rebellious smile filled Amami's gaunt face.

But basically, only its master could give a shikigami magical energy. In other words, the shikigami responsible for taking care of him would have to be the shikigami of another Onmyouji. Also, keeping the shikigami of another Onmyouji next to him was equivalent to having his life constantly being held by that Onmyouji.

Amami probably knew several Onmyouji whom he could trust. But there definitely weren't any people he could trust enough not to betray him, even if he was in a position where the Onmyou Agency was pursuing him.

However.

"......That works out. Chief Amami. Could you allow me to accompany you when you hide underground?"

"Touji-kun!"

The principal's eyes widened in shock at the student who suddenly proposed this. Kyouko and Tenma were the same. Even Suzuka's face was of surprise.

"Hey, Touji!?"

"T-That's too reckless. Hiding underground, how can you....."

"I'll find a way." But Touji replied calmly to his friends who doubted their ears.

"I haven't had any plans of returning to the academy up to now. Most importantly-"

He cast a challenging look at Amami who sat on the sofa.

"It seems like Yashamaru is eyeing me for personal reasons. Chief Amami. Did you know that I was a living spirit?"

"......Yeah, I've heard."

"'This' oni is the oni that 'possessed' me when I was pulled into the 'Great Hinamatsuri Purification' spiritual disaster terrorist attack where Yashamaru - Dairenji Shidou - transformed into an oni. So it seems that I have some connection with that guy. 'Same boat', he called me. He said 'we've ended up in the same boat'."

"....."

The eyes of Amami narrowed tightly into slits as he listened. "......So?" Even his urging voice held a solemnity different from before.

"Of course, he told me especially to my face that 'I have no reason to ignore you'. In other words, I also have to hide in a place where that guy's eyes and ears don't reach. Becoming the charging station of the shikigami responsible for taking care of you is fine. Would you allow me to accompany you?"

Though Touji made the proposal lightly, everyone present understood that he was speaking seriously.

Before this conversation happened, when it had only been the four students talking, Touji had been the one who had said 'We'll probably split up after this. We can't stay together like before anymore'. Without a doubt, Touji had already decided to leave the others and hide himself at the time.

Then, Touji had continued like this. He had said 'But even so, we have a common goal. To find Harutora - and Natsume - and to lecture them'.

"......My goal is to find Harutora and Natsume. Also, I want to get in touch with Ohtomo-sensei. In that area, my goal should be the same as Chief Amami's. So, we have a reason to move together. Isn't that right?"

Touji spoke fearlessly to the former Onmyou Agency veteran. Kyouko, Tenma, and Suzuka swallowed and stared nervously at Touji.

"Also..... I need to train myself. As fast as possible. As much as possible. I can feel from last night that if I stay as I am, I won't be able to do anything afterwards even if I find Harutora and Natsume. Since it involves the two of them..... the 'Tsuchimikado', then the situation from last night will definitely happen again. At that time, I'll need the strength to 'express' myself. I can't bear staying a student."

Words and a tone that seemed to a third party to be finding faults and deeply embedded with anger. But of course, Touji wasn't finding faults with Amami. It was directed towards himself.

Amami sank into the sofa, gazing at Touji.

".....Touji. Though you're quite determined, the task of training you isn't something that the current me can do, you know?"

"I have some thoughts regarding that. If possible, please let me consult with you."

Again, Touji looked straight back at Amami who stared at him.

Then, after a long silence.

".....Alright."

Amami accepted the student's proposal. Kyouko and the others stared at the two in shock. The principal's expression was solemn, but she didn't interject.

"Just like you said, I also need 'someone mobile'. I'll use you. Follow along."

Amami announced in a chilly voice without any trace of a smile. That wasn't the attitude towards a 'student' like Touji expected, but rather, the attitude towards an underling.

Then, the meaning of Amami's attitude also reached Touji.

Touji grinned, in contrast to the cold Amami.

"...Many thanks."

He thanked him briefly.

Part 2

After Touji and Amami left the apartment, they rode a van to relocate.

The one driving was Touji's shikigami, Suisen. But though she was Touji's shikigami in name, Touji was just the provisional master who just gave her magical energy. Amami was the one who actually controlled her. A shikigami that Miyo had prepared to be responsible for taking care of Amami's physical disabilities, who had originally been a high-class shikigami serving the Kurahashi family.

She was a shikigami with the form of a beautiful girl, with a young appearance but a mature air. Hence, her age looked to be both twenty and thirty. Her clothing was out of Amami's interests, and although Touji had called it glaring and spoken against it, that was negated since Suisen could use stealth magic. Other than taking care of Amami, Suisen was also responsible for all the household chores like cooking, cleaning, and washing chores, maintaining and creating magical tools, and driving. Also, she performed various duties in place of Touji and Amami, who hoped to stay away from other as much as possible. By now, she had become an indispensable entity to Touji and Amami's fugitive life.

The car left Roppongi and headed to Shibuya. The destination was the ruins of the old Onmyou Academy. More accurately, it was the first-class magic training location near the derelict academy building.

The academy building currently in use was a new structure that had been built three years prior. The old building that had been used before that was also in Shibuya. That old academy building had long since been torn down and a different structure had been built, but the nearby practice field had been sealed and left there. Touji and the others were heading to that practice field.

".....Are you coming too this time?"

"Hah. Isn't it inconvenient if I'm with you?"

"Our supervisor friend makes me uncomfortable."

"Ha. That's because of your current power. If you're dissatisfied, why don't you hurry up and improve."

Amami, who sat in the backseat along with his wheelchair, smiled wickedly. His assistant Touji cursed 'tch', Amami's expression emerging in his mind even without needing to turn his head.

...Well, no helping it.

This was also customary proceedings. Touji's eyes housed a powerful light, and he sincerely accepted Amami's words.

He had already lived a fugitive life with Amami for a year and a half. Though Amami had the intense personality of a rotten old man, he was a rotten old man with backbone, a rotten old man who could be trusted. Also, he was surprisingly gentle to the immature youngster Touji. But personally, Touji was very unhappy.

For example, Amami had been Ohtomo's boss in the past. But the relationship between the two during their time in the Mystical Investigators was probably completely different from the current relationship between Amami and Touji.

The situation of Amami and Touji's current relationship was actually no different from boss and subordinate. But Amami and Ohtomo had both been in the 'Twelve Divine Generals'. Powers who recognized each other. There had undoubtedly been no politeness and apprehension between them. But there ought to have been trust towards each other - whether personally or in terms of ability.

After that incident, Amami had escaped the eyes and ears of the Onmyou Agency while making a request of an Onmyou doctor that he called an old friend, doing his best to recover his wounded body. Amami, whose burned throat hadn't been able to make a sound for some time, had now recovered to the point where he could be a constantly-jabbering rotten old man. And he had even thought of a way to connect the cut tendons of his hands, making his fingers movable.

But even if he relied on magic to recover his 'wounds', he couldn't deny that his strength had weakened.

Amami was already old. Recovering would naturally take time - rather, it was quite debatable whether he would even be able to recover to a state similar to before. Though he could move his fingers, in the end he couldn't expect to rapidly form seals like he could in the past. Even walking with his own strength - though it wasn't that he couldn't walk at all - was difficult in his current state.

Of course, with their spirit-sensing abilities sealed, even Onmyouji were no different from ordinary people. Amami and Touji were moving together now not because leaving Touji alone was worrisome, but rather because Amami would be unable to successfully escape at all without Suisen in case something happened.

Even in that kind of situation, he was indifferent - or rather, he was even bold. Though that was admirable, Amami's burden would undoubtedly be substantially less if Ohtomo were the one with him instead of Touji.

In the end, even if Amami was being pursued by this level of adversity, he could still overcome it and stride forward. The one who had recovered his body was an Onmyou doctor, but he was the one who had the connections with that Onmyou doctor, and more importantly, he had the reliable charisma to make the doctor happy to treat him even when he was a fugitive from the Onmyou Agency. In other words, that was Amami's 'strength'. Amami was the one who had raised funds for their escape, and Amami was the one who had made various preparations. Amami was also the only one who gathered new information, established plans, and gave orders. There was no opportunity for Touji to take the stage - rather, there wasn't a single thing that Touji was more useful than Amami at right now. Honestly, all he had was maintaining Suisen's level of magical energy.

Of course, maintaining Suisen was also an important job. Most importantly, if he considered the gap in experience between himself and Amami or Ohtomo, then the comparison itself was extremely foolish.

But even though he wasn't a professional, Touji was no longer a 'student'. No matter whether he had credentials, he was already standing in the same territory as Amami and Ohtomo. That meant he was relying on himself. He made his own choices.

Then naturally, being inferior was no good. Though Amami was generous, Touji couldn't allow that.

...Hurry up and improve..... Huh.

That's right. As Touji thought that:

"... The leap of a horse does not surpass ten strides.[20]"

".....What. Confucius or Laozi[21]?"

"Xunzi[22], actually. Aren't I an intellectual? Right, Suisen?"

"Yes. Daizen-sama is quite knowledgeable."

Holding the steering wheel, Suisen laughed pleasantly with a bell-like sound and replied. Amami proudly waved his fan with a 'right, right?'. Touji gazed at the windshield, cursing.

Touji didn't know the meaning of Amami's words.

But he understood the intent of that statement. He was so good at seeing through other peoples' hearts, that rotten old man.

"Incidentally, Xunzi also had the saying 'drive a slow horse ten times'[23]. It means 'work ten times harder if you're falling behind'."

"A soul-cleansing idiom."

"It's an educated plaything. Right, Suisen?"

"Yes. Daizen-sama is extremely educated."

The proud Amami, the pleasantly-smiling Suisen, and the frowning Touji. What was educated about that old man who was fanning himself in the middle of winter. Though he felt that way..... Joking around at this kind of time really was Amami's gentleness, and could even be called indulgence in some sense.

Work ten times harder, as he said. But if he continued to lag behind, it was futile no matter what he did. It wasn't one step at a time, it was two steps at a time, three steps at a time, or else he wouldn't be able to fill the hopeless 'gap' that existed right now.

'Wait until all of the people in front of you are dead'[24] - Touji hadn't been granted that kind of time.

"....."

Then, Amami's frivolous words still continued and Suisen carefully responded, an elegant smile emerging on her. Touji put his elbow on the car door, wordlessly continuing to stare forward.

Not long afterwards, the car reached the destination.

Though he had often taken note of the surroundings while moving, he had 'watched' the surroundings particularly carefully since they reached the vicinity of the destination.

The closed training area had an appearance similar to a countryside cultural center or athletic stadium. Because they visited this place often, it was easy to detect any abnormalities. There were no abnormalities tonight, just like it had been up to now.

But he couldn't feel the presence of the person who should have been here first at all. He couldn't detect aura either. It wasn't that he hadn't arrived, it was stealth magic.

It was a high-level stealth magic that he still wouldn't be able to see even if he were inside. Touji suppressed his faint anxiety.

The current Touji could easily use that level of stealth magic. But even for the same stealth magic, the gap between them was abundantly clear.

That was probably the biggest difference between a student and a professional. The Onmyou Academy students were required to 'use' magic. However, professionals were required to 'proficiently use' magic. Only the latter cleared the passing line on speed, power, finesse, and the skill of use to perform competently from the start. For example, no matter how a Mystical Investigator used a stealth magic that a magic criminal could see through, it had zero value. Or, even someone who could use the Fire Realm magic couldn't be recognized as an exorcist if he couldn't use it to purify a spiritual disaster.

Onmyoudou - at least 'General Onmyoudou' - was a 'practical field of study'. There was no meaning in anything that wasn't useful.

But.

...'On the other hand, Touji. Even low-skill stealth magic or second-class magic that's mere lip service can become outstanding 'magic' if it's 'useful'. The sound of this waving fan can set back and disrupt the chanting of the enemy in certain situations. Also, that area of 'magic' can't be learned no matter how you read or train your magical energy.'

Words that he had heard from Amami before flashed through his mind.

...'Depending on how you use your brain, you can get as much as you want out of your training methods. There's a saying that 'the stupid can succeed through persisted study'[25], but that's not the whole truth."

Amami was very hands-off about this 'exchange'. No, he had clearly opposed it at the start. To be honest, it was Touji's egoism that had forced it through. Hence, Touji was uncharacteristically ashamed of forcing Amami to take the risk of accompanying him every time.

...Power, huh.....

The amateur who had dropped out of the Onmyou Academy halfway through had no words to refute his power being called insufficient by the Divine General who was the former Chief of the Mystical Investigators. He could only improve with all his might.

Touji walked off the car. Suisen quickly got off and circled around to the back, preparing to let Amami off. Suisen definitely wasn't powerful for a shikigami, but she possessed a physical strength superior to a grown man, unlike her gentle appearance. After waiting for Suisen to deftly put Amami down, Touji walked towards the practice field.

The other party ought to have noticed them already. But Touji still couldn't catch his aura. That was natural considering the difference in strength between the two, but the blame for that being natural was on him for being unable to improve. That difference was his weakness, as well as a disgrace. He couldn't gloss over that fact or avert his eyes.

The training area had been locked after being closed, but since he had started secretly using this place, he had broken the original lock and replaced it with a new one. The magical barrier was also the same. Touji, Suisen, and Amami on the wheelchair that Suisen pushed, entered the training area in the dead of night.

The interior was quite dim, since the lights were out. Touji lit a portable flashlight that he carried for Amami. They entered and passed through the hallway, heading towards the stadium in the depths.

Of course, there weren't any sounds inside the training area. The footsteps of the two of them and the noise of the wheelchair resounded loudly in the dark corridor. The fact that he was extremely concerned about that noise proved Touji's nervousness. At the end of the hallway was the entrance connected to the stadium. Touji opened the double doors and peeked inside. Then, his expression stiffened slightly. No one was inside.

The stadium was vast, with the area of about three basketball fields. Because light outside shone in through windows placed high up, it was quite bright compared to the hallway. But immediately getting a grasp of its entirety was very difficult.

After Touji beckoned to Suisen for her to wait, he turned off the light from his portable flashlight and entered the stadium alone.

He carefully surveyed the vast, dark stadium.

Then--

"...Idiot."

A scornful voice came from behind him. Right next to the double doors. Touji ground his teeth and rapidly looked behind his back.

"You're slow no matter how much time goes by, Touji. Are you really a living spirit? Also, don't make people wait, trash."

A man stood with his arms crossed and his back against the stadium wall next to the door that Touji entered. A young man who was slightly older than Touji.

Cropped-short silver hair and sunglasses with tinted lenses. Earrings, chains, and other crude jewelry. He currently wore a furred down jacket, with black jeans and work boots below.

Also, an 'X' mark similar to Amami's was carved on the man's forehead.

Touji suppressed his emotions, snorting lightly.

".....It looks like you already heard about the business between Ohtomo-sensei and Kogure-san. So anxious you started getting frantic, huh."

"A brat who won't shut his mouth, just like always. Ah, though it's actually praiseworthy to still talk shit even after being kicked over so many times. .....If not, there would be no value in it."

The man wore a smile similar to a ferocious hound's, slowly leaving the wall behind his back.

"So? Did you come after checking it out?"

"......Yeah."

"Alright. Then, let's 'exchange'."

Kagami Reiji casually announced to Touji who nodded in response.

Part 3

Kagami had started to carry out 'exchanges' with Amami and Touji last fall. It just happened to be slightly after the time when Kogure transferred from the Exorcist Bureau to the Mystical Investigators.

At the time, the Mystical Investigators had major issues. Tsuchimikado Harutora, who was viewed as the reincarnation of Tsuchimikado Yakou, along with the 'Shadow' of the Twelve Divine Generals, Ohtomo Jin. The two were to be arrested. But that wasn't anything simple. That was because both were powerful Onmyouji, and they led multiple powerful shikigami on the level of spiritual disasters. Even if their locations were found, teams of Mystical Investigators would have an extremely hard time capturing them. That was clear in the eyes of the higher-ups alongside the reports regarding them that were submitted regarding from the frontlines.

So, the Onmyou Agency higher-ups decided to give that mission to powerful Onmyouji who could oppose them. They decided to place an Independent Exorcist of the Exorcist bureau in the Mystical Investigators.

At that time, Kagami had raised his hand first.

Kagami had quite a few connections with Harutora and Ohtomo. He craved a clear conclusion with the two of them. To Kagami, the mission of capturing Harutora and Ohtomo was a wish come true.

Also, Kagami predicted two reasons for why he could be chosen.

One was that Kagami had done Mystical Investigator work.

Though it had been for a short period of time, Kagami had belonged to the Mystical Investigators when he had first entered the Onmyou Agency. He had worked under none other than Ohtomo. Because of that, he understood the basics of the Mystical Investigators and more or less had an understanding of the target of arrest Ohtomo.

That ought to be quite a big advantage for his mission as a Mystical Investigator.

But the most important factor was that 'there was no one else'.

In the end, since the Onmyou Agency's reason for existence was the purification of spiritual disasters, Independent Exorcists whose power was renowned for being able to purify spiritual disasters alone were the aces of the business. Retiring these Independent Officers from the frontlines of spiritual disaster purification during this year when they had an increasing trend was a bold - or rather, quite a 'reckless' decision.

But on that point, Kagami was the 'backup' of the Exorcist Bureau. After all, Kagami's daily work attitude was very poor. He basically acted alone, and never mind helping out on site, he even frequently refused the orders of the Exorcist Command Room. The reason Kagami was still able to be an Independent Exorcist was because of his outstanding power and the Exorcist Bureau's insufficient fighting power. Hence, the Exorcist Bureau could only treat Kagami like a reserve force in order to utilize his capricious self.

In other words, Kagami was the best candidate for 'it's not a big problem even if we lose him'.

He ought to be the most suitable person if one Independent Officer were transferred to the Mystical Investigators. Or rather, if an Independent Officer other than himself were moved, then negative effects that couldn't be ignored would appear in the originally-complete spiritual disaster purifications. Because he understood that, Kagami had believed undoubtedly that he would be chosen when he had announced his desire to transfer.

However, before he knew it, Kogure was the one who had been moved to the Mystical Investigators.

It seemed that Kogure was the same as Kagami in that he had also desired to transfer to the Mystical Investigators. Even so, Kogure was a pure exorcist. He didn't have any experience as a Mystical Investigator, and more importantly, Kogure's place on the frontlines of spiritual disaster purification was incomparably larger than Kagami's. Actually, Kogure was undoubtedly at the forefront of the struggle of spiritual disaster purification.

Even if the person himself wanted it, the person asserted by many to be the Exorcist Bureau's young trump card couldn't be removed at the present. It wasn't just Kagami who believed this, anyone in the Exorcist Bureau did too. Even so, the higher-ups had chosen Kogure.

The biggest reason was - Needless to say, the reason Kogure's transfer had become 'realistically possible' was the return of an Independent Exorcist to the frontlines.

National First-Class Onmyouji, Shigeoka Shunsuke.

One of the only five people appointed as Independent Exorcists.

Shigeoka had temporarily left the frontlines slightly before the 'Great Hinamatsuri Purification' spiritual disaster terrorist attack happened the year before. Since then, the Exorcist Bureau had carried out spiritual disaster purifications with the system of four Independent Officers Miyachi Iwao, Yuge Mari, Kogure Zenjirou, and Kagami Reiji. In the end, although the burdens on each Independent Officer had increased, they had managed to maintain their normal business.

But now that the fifth Independent Officer was returning, they calculated that they would still be able to manage their business with a four-person system even if they took one away. Room to choose had appeared. With that, even taking the lack of Mystical Investigator experience into consideration, the 'intensely passionate about completing his mission' Kogure was more suited than the 'it's not a big problem even if we lose him' Kagami. That was what the higher-ups

thought. Kagami's usual work attitude became a stumbling block. To Kagami, it was truly hateful.

Once the person was decided, it was irreversible even if Kagami opposed it vehemently. Kagami was extremely displeased.

Hence, at the same time as he carried out his Independent Officer mission, he started searching for Harutora's and Ohtomo's whereabouts on his own.

Of course, it was an action that wasn't thought out. Maybe he could manage with Harutora, but Ohtomo was a former Mystical Investigator. Moreover, his power was first-class. If he seriously hid underground, then Kagami definitely wouldn't be able to find him alone. He hurried over every time they sparked incidents, then swallowed his irritation in the empty vacated area. And so on.

There was no one around Kagami that he could rely on to search, nor did he have any channels open to request that. Even his own information network wasn't worth mentioning. No matter how excellent an exorcist he was, in the end he was an outcast lone wolf. From society's point of view, he was just an approximately twenty-year-old 'youngster'.

Kagami himself poured his heart into training his own strength, but he had never once thought of acquiring means to rely on others. Because of that, when he faced something that he couldn't deal with using magic, he became more and more conscious that he had no chance.

Kagami's irritation and depression accumulated every day.

Then, Amami's secret communication happened to come at this time.

"Rin, hyo, toh, sha, kai, jin--"

"...Slow as hell."

Kagami mercilessly unleashed a water-element charm at Touji as he chanted the kuji-in. The magic torrent of water engulfed Touji, and the armor covering his body flashed with lag.

"The hell are you lounging around for. You should have gotten nine syllables minimum in that kind of time."

A leisurely charm magic with no formal chanted incantation whose spell was close to the default specification. Even so, it could be surprisingly effective as long as a practitioner of Kagami's level infused enough magical energy. In this situation, speed was the greatest strength.

The speed of the battle in a magic battle against a high-level practitioner was decisively different from the speed of a battle against an ordinary practitioner. No matter how 'outstanding' a magic was controlled, it was meaningless if the practitioner was beaten before he used it.

At the same time as he casually pointed out his slow reaction, Kagami quickly readied the next charm in his hand. A wood-element charm. Seeing this, Touji allowed his armor to lag while leaving the flow of water. He changed to a hand seal. A basic seal. Kagami snickered slightly, flicking out the wood-element charm with his finger like before.

"曩莫 萨缚 怛他孽帝毗药 萨缚--!"

Touji chanted Acala's Fire Realm magic. His thinking was extremely clear. He had seen Kagami take out a wood-element charm after a water-element charm and surmised that his intent was water generates wood of the Five Elements Mutual Generation. Water aura generated wood aura and grew into tendrils of vines. He planned on using the flame of the Fire Realm magic to counter it.

His judgment wasn't bad, and his immediate and decisive actions also passed.

But that was just a textbook[26] level of skill.

"...Order."

Kagami poured magical energy into the magic of the wood-element charm that left his fingers. Sparks flew from the wood-element charm with a crackle. Noticing this, Touji stopped his incantation in surprise, but at that time the wood-element charm had already burst into sparks of electricity and spurted forth

electricity. Also, it used the prior water as a medium. The water aura generated wood aura that assaulted Touji in the blink of an eye.

"Gaah!"

The dark stadium lit up with flashes. Touji yelled and was knocked away by the impact.

He dropped to the ground with a loud sound. Then, his limbs were momentarily paralyzed and unable to move. The armor wrapping his body lagged intensely and half had already disappeared.

Amami, who observed in a corner of the stadium, moved instantly. But Kagami stuck his hands into the pockets of his jacket with an uncaring look.

".....Wood-element charms are surprisingly convenient. Outside of lightning, wood aura has very good characteristics of 'wind', much like metal aura. In the sense that it conquers earth aura, it's also connected to 'earthquakes'. It has a very wide range of use. Of course, you have to watch out for the balance in water generates wood of Five Elements Mutual Generation."

".....Really, thanks a lot....."

Touji gritted his teeth, forcing the words out in a groan. Then, he put his hands against the ground and staggered up.

Never mind the toughness at being okay after being unilaterally beaten down like that, it was incredible that his eyes still hadn't lost their fighting spirit. But if he wavered at this level, this kind of exchange wouldn't have any value at all. It had already been more than a whole year since he was requested to train Touji. The results of that showed clearly - at a pace slightly surpassing Kagami's expectations. Honestly, he was quite outstanding.

Kagami cast a gaze in Amami's direction.

The lights weren't on as usual, and hence the stadium was dark. Amami sat on the wheelchair on the other side of the darkness enclosing the vast space, gazing over at them.

He wasn't 'seeing', he was purely 'looking'[27]. But even so, Kagami had no intent of looking down on him. There wasn't a single fool in the Twelve Divine Generals who would look down on the man Amami Daizen no matter what kind of condition he was in.

Kagami indifferently recalled when he had first received Amami's communication.

He had been thoroughly shocked at the time. He hadn't been able to believe it immediately. After all, Amami had suddenly vanished without a trace after the Twin-Horned Syndicate sweeping operation had happened last summer, and his whereabouts had been unclear since then. Amami had been the Chief of the Mystical Investigators at the time and had been essentially the second-in-command of the Onmyou Agency. It was a huge incident for that kind of VIP to suddenly vanish. Actually, a search led by the Mystical Investigators was still continuing.

But it was a fact that the tremors within the agency had been minimized since Chief Kurahashi had managed the Mystical Investigators directly. Then there had been the overlapping incidents around Tsuchimikado Harutora and the movements of the Onmyou legal reform, and Amami's disappearance had slowly vanished from the memories of the Onmyou Agency employees. Amami had come in contact at that kind of time.

A sudden contact in the silence five months after he vanished. Moreover, he had contacted Kagami. It was totally natural for Kagami to feel shocked and doubtful.

But on the other hand, the instinct 'that's why it must be the genuine article' flashed by. That method of bluntly bypassing the surroundings evoked Amami's feel in Kagami.

Kagami had directly met Amami afterwards through a number of stages. At that time, he also realized that Touji, whose whereabouts had become unclear after Harutora's incident, had also been moving with Amami.

Also, he learned the reason for their hiding.

'.....So that's it? The mastermind behind the Twin-Horned Syndicate was none other than the top of the Onmyou Agency, Kurahashi Genji?'

Amami had affirmed Kagami's confirmation with a serious look.

He understood that it wasn't a simple lie or joke by seeing the magical mark carved into Amami's forehead. Because the same mark had been carved into Kagami's forehead. A seal laid by Kurahashi Genji. Also, Amami's completely cut off his magical energy. Since that kind of thing was on his forehead, then it was certain that at the least, Amami and Kurahashi were hostile.

But if this wasn't a lie or a joke, then Amami's words were a truth that would shock the Onmyou Agency and the magic community. No, it wasn't just the magic community that would be shaken. The Twin-Horned Syndicate had led to two spiritual disaster terrorist attacks in the past and had brought many deaths and heavy damage to Tokyo.

Amami also spoke of the connection between the Kurahashi family and the Souma clan.

According to Amami's words, it seemed that the Kurahashi family and Souma family were old allies who had assisted Yakou together in the Pacific War era. That incident - the series of incidents where Harutora awoke as Tsuchimikado Yakou - was a plan of the Kurahashi and Souma to resurrect Yakou, but they had failed and ended up with Yakou opposing them. That wasn't just unrelated business to Kagami. After all, Kagami had confronted and fought Harutora before he vanished. He had witnessed the two shikigami gathering by Harutora's side - the scene of Hishamaru and Kakugyouki.

The link between the Onmyou Agency Chief and a fanatic terrorist group. Also, that link stemmed from a connection even before the war. This was no longer

something at the level of a scandal. It was an incredible bomb that could blow the entire Onmyou Agency away.

However, Kagami was more interested in the intent of Amami for disclosing this to him than that problem.

".....What's your goal? Don't tell me you want me to tell the police and expose Kurahashi Genji's crimes..... You're not thinking that, right?"

Since the incident had developed this large, even Kagami couldn't act recklessly.

Most importantly, he had no interest.

Even if what Amami said wasn't a lie or a joke, Kagami wouldn't take it as one hundred percent true. Because he had no actual evidence. But verifying its authenticity would take quite some work, and would be extremely dangerous, and there would be no benefit. Even more importantly, he didn't have the enthusiasm.

If he opposed Kurahashi Genji and fought with him and the Souma clan - to be honest, he did think 'I want to try'. Targeting worthy enemies was the meaning of Kagami's life as well as the source of his strength. The stronger the enemy was, the more there was 'value in acting'.

However, even so, Ohtomo was first, and then was Harutora. To the Kagami back then - no, it still hadn't changed now - coming to a conclusion with the two of them was the top priority. He had no thoughts of deliberately getting involved in the conspiracy within the Onmyou Agency.

But it seemed that Amami had already realized Kagami's attitude. So, Amami brought an 'exchange' for Kagami.

That was to 'train Touji'.

It seemed that Amami had fled the Onmyou Agency - rather, Kurahashi Genji's eyes and ears - with Touji and hid underground to pursue traces of Harutora and Ohtomo. In other words, he had the same goal as Kagami in 'finding the two'. But in the end, he was the former Chief of the Mystical Investigators, so even if his

magic was completely sealed, Amami was still better than Kagami in the field of pursuing fugitives.

Then, Amami offered to inform Kagami of the information the two of them obtained in their search.

Amami and Touji would inform Kagami of their information as they pursued Harutora and Ohtomo.

In return, Kagami would train Touji each time.

That was the 'exchange' that Kagami established with Amami and Touji.

".....Ah, I can't find any motivation....."

Right now, Touji was on alert for the next attack while watching for openings in front of Kagami.

To be honest, Touji was 'pretty good'. The special training Kagami was carrying out now was like actual battle, even a professional exorcist wouldn't be able to keep up quickly. Even given that Touji was a living spirit, he had merit.

But even so, that wasn't a reason for Kagami to help him.

No matter how much of an exchange this was, Kagami couldn't confirm how much Amami was giving him of the information he obtained. Amami also ought to know that Kagami was searching for Harutora and Ohtomo in order to defeat them. Then he couldn't possibly straightforwardly give them all the information. Though he certainly didn't have any other sources of information, that wasn't to say that he would help Touji with special training for some unclear information. From Kagami's point of view, this wasn't worthwhile.

However, that said, Kagami had agreed to the exchange and was teaching seriously. This was because of a certain 'condition' that Kagami had added on to the exchange.

Also, there was another reason.

That was that Ohtomo had once been a teacher.

"......Then."

Kagami muttered quietly.

Touji had already released his own seal and wielded the strength of a living spirit. The armor covering his body was proof of that.

In other words, he didn't need to worry that he would die easily.

"I'm starting."

Right as the words left his mouth, Kagami released consecutive magic.

Unmoving Golden Chains. Charm magic. Various magical walls. First-Class Spirit Language. And Fire Realm magic. Touji desperately fought back against all of it.

But it wasn't enough. Because Kagami was regulating himself - that said, even though he was throwing things out casually and although their magical energy outputs were balanced, Touji couldn't keep up in speed.

"Hey. How many times do I have to say it before you understand. It won't possibly be of any use if you refine your magical energy after you finish selecting your incantation. Think while running, seeing, and continuously refining your magical energy. Ready enough for the next go when you're using your magic."

As he said that, he also unleased Unmoving Golden Chains without an incantation or hand seal.

When playing around with an excellent student from an academy, the most effective method was to use 'mixed' magic.

That wasn't limited to the Onmyou Academy. The growing newcomers who weren't yet serious practitioners would always use magic 'carefully'. But that was natural, as if they made a mistake and let first-class magic lose control, the practitioner as well as the surroundings could easily be harmed. Hence, when

mastering magic, one had to get used to being careful and attentive before a magic had been completely formed. That was common instruction.

But in a magical 'battle', that carefulness would often become shackles.

Even if 'accuracy' - or 'safety' - was the basic of the basics when using magic, a magic battle was only a magic battle with an opponent. If in the time that one readied an 'accurate' and 'safe' magic the opponent attacked with 'quick', 'imprecise', and 'dangerous' means, they would be the one to lose. At most they could only pray that the opponent's magic would lose control.

One could only act crudely in order to win against such an opponent. You would have to use magic even at the cost of safety. Of course, at the same time, you would have to stay above the bottom line of not going out of control - or, even if control was lost, it had to be within an acceptable range.

For a comparison, it was a technique like arriving at the destination without getting in a crash or letting the engine overheat. In the professional world, everyone was equipped with a high-performance engine. Given that, how could one win even a bit more speed than the opponent? 'Imprecise' yet 'quick' magic was the answer.

Also--

"...Order."

Kagami released a fire-element charm. Touji immediately pulled out a water-element charm to try to suppress it.

However, the magic of the first-element charm that Kagami released didn't activate, it just floated to the ground. "Wha?" As Touji's eyes widened, the Unmoving Golden Chains that had been released without a sound caught the living spirit and sealed his movements.

"Shit!" Touji struggled with all his might, exhausting his demonic aura to forcefully shake off the Golden Chains. During that, Kagami looked at Touji with a wicked smile.

"You were slow this time. Reacting and using all your power wasn't bad, but you're done if you expose yourself like that, Touji."

Honestly, he had just used a fire-element charm and chanted an incantation, but hadn't sent it any magical energy and had simultaneously thrown out a soundlessly-released Unmoving Golden Chains. In other words, it was just a simple diversion. But it was significantly effective against a newcomer rashly trying to keep up with the speed of the magic battle.

Also, he did things like use fire aura instead of water aura to block fire aura. Or deliberately making a mistake in his Unmoving Golden Chains and diverting that spell onto wood-aura vines and such.

'Unconventional' tactics, and undoubtedly tricks. But tricks had limited methods of use depending on the time and occasion. Things like conventions were only effective in a battle of similarly-skilled people. If the opponent changed their fighting style, then the balance would instantly change. That was the concept of yin and yang that comprised the Five Elements.

"How is it? It's tough to keep up your pace against a high-level opponent, huh? But you won't be able to win against anyone stronger than you right now as long as you can't do that."

"....."

"Ha. You finally don't have any of that frivolous talk you're so good at anymore, huh? Your friend's gonna lose his other eye if you're slow, you know."

An intense fighting spirit ignited in Touji's eyes again when he heard that.

Kagami had fought Harutora and cut his left eye with his blade 'Higekiri'. He had already told Touji about that - or rather, he had actually been lured by Amami's wordplay and inadvertently gave it voice. After Touji learned of that incident, he had buried their past relationship in his heart and had asked Kagami to teach him.

But it seemed that his anger at a friend being wounded still hadn't vanished. That unconcealed anger reached him from Touji as he started to attack again. Kagami dodged while continuing to speak.

"Listen, Touji. You're basically the power-hitter type. I said before to always keep refining magical energy. Just like breathing. It should be natural, not conscious."

Kagami frankly taught Touji everything he thought of without any modification. Though he didn't know whether it was the correct answer, he was instructing him extremely seriously.

Kagami thought this way. He knew that Ohtomo had been a Mystical Investigator. But after Ohtomo resigned from the Mystical Investigator, he had become a teacher at the Onmyou Academy.

Then what exactly had that person been thinking while he had been teaching students as a teacher? That kind of things had he been thinking about? What had the man who had climbed into the Twelve Divine Generals been pondering as he taught immature students about magic?

Maybe that was completely useless thinking for the purpose of defeating Ohtomo.

However, it was worth a try.

It wasn't all because of Touji. He had to try everything in order to win against a high-level opponent.

And as for the other reason Kagami accepted the exchange.

".....Well. It's about time. That's enough warm-up."

After he said that, Kagami stopped the battle and slowly moved away from the area in front of Touji.

He moved to the wall of the arena and took off and tossed aside the down jacket he wore.

He stretched his neck, returned to the center, and said:

"You've piled up quite a bit of resentment, right? Let me help you vent that."

"......Thanks a ton. Putting aside getting hurt, try not to die, alright?"

Touji was still short of breath as he waited for Kagami. But a dazzling thirst burned in the eyes glaring at Kagami.

Anger and irritation at himself were held in Touji's eyes. Along with a crude destructive impulse. The strength of the 'oni' eagerly awaiting release.

Kagami confronted Touji again, making the many rings on his fingers hit each other to make a jangling sound.

His eyes sharpened, and he announced in a voice colder than ice.

"......Come. Let me teach you."

Kagami had added a 'condition' to the exchange.

That was that if Touji fell, Kagami would take his oni as a shikigami.

Touji gritted his teeth so tightly that his fangs ground.

The horns extending from his forehead grew even longer and wider.

Then, Touji chanted an incantation.

"Second seal, purge!"

That was something that had happened the first time Touji received Kagami's special training.[28]

The dead of night. This was the location, the stadium of the old Onmyou Academy's training area.

"In any case, the current you isn't worth mentioning. But one trick is better than nothing. Let your oni out."

Back then, Kagami had abruptly opened his mouth with an undisguised attitude of evaluation.

Touji couldn't possibly have any objections either. He felt a quiet tension in his heart while wordlessly taking off the bandanna wrapped around his forehead.

In a position farther away from the two of them was Amami sitting on his wheelchair along with Suisen who pushed the wheelchair. Though Amami never showed it on his expression, his mood was probably very complex. That was also because it was actually Touji who had proposed this exchange, not Amami.

I have to train myself. Touji had told Amami this when he had mentioned hiding underground with him. Of course, those were his true feelings. Poignantly true feelings.

The night Natsume died. Touji had done almost nothing at all. If someone else heard this, they might hastily deny it, but Touji himself had said with sincere feeling that he had just frantically run around. He hadn't been able to intervene at all.

Useless. His anxiety depressed him.

If things were like that back on that evening, then it didn't even need to be said that even more difficult situations waited ahead in the future. Becoming strong was Touji's priority. He had no room to choose for this.

The Divine General Kagami Reiji's nickname was 'Ogre Eater'. That stemmed from the strength from a captured oni that Kagami used. He had heard that once before from Principal Kurahashi. But according to Amami's words, Kagami had was only called that because he had purified several oni up to now. In any case, Kagami was used to oni - or more accurately, used to 'Type-Ogres'.

Touji had been possessed by an oni because of the first spiritual disaster terrorist attack in history, the 'Great Hinamatsuri Purification'. Since he was a living spirit possessed by an oni, he was close to a 'Type-Ogre'.

The oni had brought Touji spiritual encumbrance, but now it was a valuable 'strength'. Kagami didn't need to describe it as his 'one trick'. Touji definitely had no way to immediately increase his strength other than by using the oni inside his body.

The most effective way to learn how methods of using an oni was by learning from someone familiar with oni. Even if that person was a senior who ought to be spat on for many reasons.

"...First seal, purge."

That incantation was the keyword that lifted the seal cast on Touji's body.

Immediately, Touji's oni who had been firmly suppressed by the seal slowly moved and awoke. Demonic aura mixed with his entire body's aura spurted forth, and the density grew and then took form.

A pair of lagging yet ominously-flashing horns extended from his forehead. Inauspicious, sharp fangs appeared between his lips.

At the same time, ancient-looking armor[29] appeared. Also, a helmet symbolizing the oni. This armor wasn't completely materialized; instead, it was flashing and half-transparent as it covered Touji's body.

An ancient samurai flashing with crackling lag overlapped with Touji. It was a form like an undead fallen warrior.

This was Touji's 'oni'.

This ought to be the first time Amami directly saw this form. Maybe he didn't have any spirit-seeing ability at the moment, but he understood that feeling of pressure and danger and the solemnity of his expression increased. Suisen also seemed openly surprised from behind him.

But the composure of Kagami who stood in front of him was calm.

He endured the demonic aura gusting from Touji's body as if it were a breeze, looking over expressionlessly.

Then, his face staying expressionless, he spoke.

"......You can still keep going."

It wasn't doubtful, nor was it confirmation. It was a tone of 'certainty'. The corner of Touji's eye twitched.

Touji accurately understood the meaning in Kagami's words.

The one who had placed the seal on Touji was his primary physician and Harutora's father, Tsuchimikado Takahiro. In the first place, a seal had been placed on Touji's oni because Touji would have been consumed by the oni if it hadn't been suppressed. The oni would instantly gnaw away at Touji when the seal binding it vanished. Then, it would appear as a Phase Three spiritual disaster using his body as a vessel. The so-called 'Type-Ogres' referred to mobile spiritual disasters that materialized with humans as vessels.

Hence, Takahiro had overlapped several heavy seals in order to keep Touji from becoming a spiritual disaster. Right now, Touji was in a state where one of those was released. In other words, he was extracting strength from the oni inside through a gap in the seals covering it.

Also, Kagami had said 'you can still keep going' at a glance after 'seeing' this state.

Great. A daring smile emerged on Touji's face.

"......Second seal, purge!"

Touji chanted an incantation again. With that as the trigger, the second seal was released.

The change was rapid.

The spiritual pressure over his body instantly grew, and more and denser demonic aura poured forth. The armor that had continued lagging before settled down and more than half-materialized. In addition, there was the illusion that Touji's body itself grew larger. His internal pressure swelled, seeming about to burst.

Also, the presence of the oni in Touji's body suddenly swelled greatly.

It touched the freedom it had been separated from for a long time and howled in dreadful happiness. It tried to immediately engulf its host and seize control, extending its ominous fangs towards Touji.

A violent and ferocious destructive impulse slowly tainted his mind. At the same time as it desired everything, it tried to abandon everything. An intense thirst for that kind of hedonic destruction. He hadn't experienced 'this' since the Nue. Touji intently maintained his own consciousness, resisting the rising oni with all his spirit.

But as he desperately resisted the oni, he noticed it. He noticed the 'strength' that constantly poured forth. Completely incomparable to the state when he had released the first seal. A far, far stronger spiritual power.

Suddenly, Touji thought of the Five Elements Mutual Generation using a spiritual disaster as its basis that Harutora had shown in his battle with Shaver. At the time, Harutora had made the wood aura of a 'Type-Worm' generate fire aura, and had used that fire aura to defeat Shaver. Touji clearly remembered the astonishing magical energy Harutora had released at the time.

Five Elements Mutual Generation using a Phase Three.

He should be able to do the same thing with the 'Type-Ogre' in his body. He could use this spiritual disaster - and moreover, it was a mobile spiritual disaster - that was concealed in his body.

If. If he were able to use this condition for battle, then he might be able to 'get through' the battles in the future. Touji thought this as he tried hard to endure the oni's pressure.

But--

Kagami's opinion was different.

".....You can still keep going."

Kagami said coldly.

Touji couldn't help but be speechless.

".....What's wrong? You can still keep going, right? Do it."

Kagami's expression hadn't changed at all since he had started releasing the seal. It was indifferent, as if this was nothing special. And then, seeing Kagami like that, Touji realized.

Actually, what Touji was currently doing wasn't much to Kagami. Kagami was an Independent Exorcist. He had witnessed countless spiritual disasters up to now and purified every single one of them. Of course, it was the same for 'Type-Ogres'. Wasn't that why he was the 'Ogre Eater'?

Supposing that he would have to fight an opponent of Kagami's league, this level of strength wasn't worth mentioning.

"...Wait."

Amami interrupted from where he sat on the wheelchair.

"Stop there, Kagami. ...Touji. Put the seal back."

"You wait by the side, old man. Don't interrupt if you don't even have spirit sight."

"Hah? Don't joke around. If you plan on making Touji fall and become an oni, I won't be able to fulfill the 'condition' from before, right? Touji, reseal."

Amami didn't flinch. He ignored Kagami's words, ordering Touji again.

Amami bore the greatest danger in this exchange. After all, Kagami was an Independent Exorcist. He was a person belonging to the Exorcist Bureau - or, the Onmyou Agency. Amami would have trouble even escaping alone in front of a person belonging to his enemy's side, but he had especially come out to meet him. He was in a position where he could be taken away helplessly if Kagami betrayed him in this moment.

Even so, Amami had agreed to Touji's proposal in the end. Amami's own plans were probably in this, but that still didn't reduce the danger that he was captured.

Since Amami had burdened himself with great danger to do this, Touji couldn't just go back without anything to show for it.

"Touji."

Kagami ordered Touji again.

"Do it."

Touji tightly gritted his teeth.

Then, just like before, a daring smile appeared on his face again.

"Third seal, purge!"

Touji bellowed.

The third seal was released.

The oni leaped.

His vision was tinted black. His entire body froze and ignited simultaneously. The oni gnawed at his mind, filling him with an ominous feeling.

His body seemed as if multiple bombs were constantly exploding without stopping. The spiritual pressure leaped up faster and faster, trying to whip 'Touji' to bits from the inside. Touji - the samurai armor becoming flames of raging demonic aura that wrapped around his body - roared.

He struck.

At Kagami. At his prey.

Kagami's movements were also completely different from before. He immediately clawed the air with his fingers, making a grid appear in the air. Touji collided with it. The flames of demonic aura streaked through the darkness, hitting the magic wall like bullets. Smash. An intense feeling of contact emanated as demonic aura and flickering flames danced wildly.

Kagami's magic wall tried to repel Touji. But Touji's feet braced against the ground, opposing the magic wall head-on.

He roared and put strength into his arms. The breath that leaked out of the gaps between his fangs was a miasma that would make a normal person faint upon contact. Even the line of sight of the burning eyes behind the iron helmet was filled with powerful magic.

"Graaah!"

The armor that was currently completely materialized shuddered and made a clattering noise as if dancing and laughing.

Touji's strength exploded and he tore apart the grid-patterned magical wall. The magical wall dispersed and demonic aura and magical energy raged. Of course, by that time Kagami had already changed positions. "...Order!" He cast charm magic from the side. A water-element charm. There wasn't even time to avoid it as it hit right on target. But Touji no longer even felt this slight pain. As the permanent barrier of the training area creaked loudly, he roared and kicked off the ground to pursue Kagami.

His mind was filled with hunting his prey. The soul-shaking impulse didn't stop urging his heart forward.

Pricking anger. Offensive impulse. A dazzling sense of release. Terror and happiness shaded dark.

The feelings of the released oni.

But the oni wasn't completely free. Even if the 'oni' was committed to rampaging, 'Touji' didn't release the last reins.

He controlled the oni like driving a galloping horse. If he let up just a bit - or if he gave it anything less than his full concentration - the reins would be stolen from him. But the remaining rationality of 'Touji' bet its existence on continuing to grasp the reins.

In any case, he couldn't stop. The demonic aura spurting forth like a volcano was released outwards by the battle. He had to reduce it, even if just a bit - he continued to lower the internal pressure. Also, he turned the consciousness of the oni towards the 'enemy' instead of 'Touji'. You could say that the oni's innate destructive impulse itself was being used as his weapon.

"...Graaaah!"

Touji punched out sharply. An uppercut slanting obliquely up. The demonic aura swirled loudly, approaching Kagami like a mixer trying to crush him into bits. Kagami put up multiple barriers that he had never seen before, using them to gradually sap the attack's power.

In that lull, Kagami counterattacked. Four original creation shikigami charms transformed into the forms of bestial skeletons. The skeleton beasts worked together and formed a hunting pack to assault the armored warrior.

One bit his calf, while one sank its teeth into his arm. One circled around behind his back to look for an opening, and one leaped at his throat.

An oni's smile emerged on Touji's lips.

First, he smashed the one leaping at him to bits with a straight punch. Then, he kicked the one on his calf, hurling it into the one behind his back. He gripped the body of the one hanging on his wrist with his other hand, and then forcefully shredded it.

The oni - Touji - absorbed the magical energy scattered from the shikigami. He sucked in deeply and exhaled with a shudder-provoking ominous presence. He savored its blinding anger alongside its joy.

He couldn't stand it.

"Graah!"

He wasn't completely suppressing the oni's explosive power, he was just letting it burst out in the direction of the enemy. He raced to Kagami with a pure hunting mentality. Kagami also immediately stopped holding back. The Divine General continuously released magic, battering the oni and Touji.

The armor flashed with lag and the flames of demonic aura were sent into disorder.

But he wasn't afraid. He charged through the center of the magic, heading straight for Kagami. "Ha!" Kagami made a joyful sound. Touji did the same. Joy. Battle, hunting, destruction, devastation; how joyful.

No, this wasn't enough. He still hadn't experienced the final thing. So he had to vent himself. His displeasure, his anger, his desire. He would show his fangs, kick the ground, release his demonic aura, split the air, and immerse himself in battle. That moment, the oni and Touji became one, becoming a ferocious warrior--

His consciousness instantly cut off.

The rationality that was left alerted him like a screech.

"...Reboot!"

His body chanted the incantation before he was conscious of it.

Instantly, the three released seals activated together. They forcefully cut off the oni's interference. The rapid resealing magic worked several times faster than the

seal-releasing process. The oni was sealed and bound once again, leaving Touji alone.

...Ugh!?

The oni's demonic aura dissipated and the materialized armor also vanished. The horns on his forehead and the fangs splitting apart his lips did the same. After Touji returned to his original form, he was carried along by his inertia and tumbled to the ground with an exclamation, unable to even stop himself.

Kagami clicked his tongue sharply, cancelling his magic at the critical moment. On the other hand, Touji still lay on the ground, panting roughly with his entire body covered in sweat.

It was as if he had been thrown completely nude from a scorching hell into the snow. Before he was conscious of it, his spiritual power had been quietly taken away. A fierce feeling of exhaustion and lack of energy. Also, his skull was assaulted by an intense, crushing pain. Breathing was also painful. He couldn't even move a finger as he lay sprawled on the ground.

Kagami's shoulder moved up and down as he breathed hard, and he stood gazing at the immobile Touji for a period of time. Then, he snorted and turned his back to Touji to pick his jacket back up.

On the other hand.

"Suisen, have you stabilized?"

Amami, waiting in the corner of the stadium, checked with Suisen behind him.

Suisen heaved a sigh, replying "Yes".

Though Suisen was responsible for taking care of Amami, she was spiritually Touji's shikigami. When Touji trained, she would move using the magical energy supplied prior, and would cut off her spiritual connection with her master as much as possible - but she couldn't possibly remain unaffected when her master was so close to transforming into an oni and thrashing around with all his power. Especially after Touji released the third seal, even Suisen herself had flickered with slight lag.

"Honestly, I can't even see spirits, but it seemed like my lifespan shortened just from watching. Or maybe that only happened because it was something I couldn't see. .....Anyways, Suisen, if you're stable, then you've got some work."

"Alright." Suisen smiled slightly at Amami's request and shook the hem of her clothing, moving to Touji's side.

She said to her master that was fallen on the ground:

"Touji-sama? Is it alright?"

"....."

He didn't even have the energy remaining to reply. Suisen took out several healing charms after he managed to groan deeply from his throat, perhaps taking that assent, and started to gently stick them on Touji's body.

The magic of the healing charms activated and his body's pain melted bit by bit. But he still didn't have any intent of moving. Touji sprawled there in an unsightly manner, slightly changing the direction of his neck and shifting his gaze.

The jacket-wearing Kagami had returned to his normal unchanged appearance.

"...Old man."

He spoke to Amami, approaching the wheelchair.

He planned on hearing information about the battle today between Ohtomo, Kogure, and the others according to the terms of the exchange. No damage from the battle up until now or even traces of fatigue could be seen from his back. Should he be angry or remorseful - however, this was reality.

Of course, there were results.

Kagami had instilled knowledge and methods for actual battle into Touji. That was undoubtedly hard-to-obtain experience.

Moreover, he hadn't been able to withstand the third seal release for the first several seconds, but he had become gradually able to 'hold on'. Also, he was mastering the tricks of pushing the oni transformation to that degree and methods of fighting in that condition bit by bit. Touji was gradually mastering a powerful strength that couldn't be compared to what he had a year and a half ago.

But half of that was consolation for himself. Though he could hold on, even so, it was for at most two minutes. Three minutes was the absolute limit. The time just now had been an extraordinarily dangerous bottom line - or rather, it had already been unreasonable. But his luck was good. If he hadn't performed the reseal before his consciousness cut off, the seal would have had no meaning.

But if he released the third seal, not only his body, but even the oni's pressure would encroach substantially on his mind. As if he would be 'consumed'. Keeping calm and clearly seeing his limits during that time was extremely difficult. If things were already like that in training against Kagami who was already used to battle, what would it be like when a real fight started?

Also, most hatefully, he had done this much - he had raised his strength with something like doping - but was still unable to touch Kagami. More importantly, even that Kagami couldn't match up to Ohtomo and Kogure.

...He really detested himself.....

Harutora, who was evaluated as spiritually tough by those around him, and Touji, who had fought freely before and who had an excellent physique. Natsume had been hailed as a genius. But their 'student' benchmarks meant nothing here.

The power of the highest-skilled Onmyouji. Now that he was this far, Touji finally started seeing their true value in his eyes. Honestly, give me a break.

".....Ugh."

The stadium's chilly ground was very comfortable for his hot body. But Touji gathered all of his resolve and spirit to raise his body up on his arms. After thanking Suisen who immediately supported him, he finally staggered up to a stand.

He breathed deeply multiple times, waiting for his physical strength to recover a bit, and started walking towards Amami and Kagami. Suisen intended lend him a shoulder, but he fully refused this time. Even if it was stupid vanity - no, because it was stupid vanity - there was no meaning if he couldn't do it all himself.

But the talk had already ended by the time Touji made his way to the two of them.

"Oh, thanks for your work."

Touji managed to smile back at Amami who laughed and said this. Suisen, following behind him, circled naturally around to Amami's back as if proclaiming that this was her post.

On the other hand, Kagami glared sharply at Touji out of the corner of his eye as he drew close.

"I heard from the old man. You were the one who saw the incident; do you have anything else to say?"

He asked in a brusque tone.

"......I already reported everything that happened there to Amami."

"Even so, you ought to have some feelings about it. For example, was that bastard Kogure going 'all-out' against Ohtomo?"

"At least it seemed that way to me. ......But I don't know what kind of level Kogure-san is when he goes 'all-out'."

Touji had witnessed Kogure's strength directly when Ashiya Doman had attacked the academy building. At the time, Kogure had worked with Ohtomo to defeat Doman, and his final big move at the end had claimed victory. It was the most powerful move that Touji had ever 'seen', surpassing what Harutora used to defeat Shaver.

But Kogure at the time had been aided by his subordinate exorcists. There had been large Yamantaka magic seals painted in the distant sky. The strike that cut Ashiya Doman in two had probably included the magical energy of that large magical array. Then, he wasn't sure how great Kogure's individual strength was. It was also possible that Kogure himself hadn't used all his power at the time.

But--

"...Scattering oni, splitting buildings, disrupting the spirit flow..... If even then he was still holding back, then I guess he wasn't going all-out."

Touji shrugged his shoulders after saying that. A slightly challenging attitude. But Kagami didn't react. He thought about something, staying silent.

Actually, it was unexpected to Touji too. He hadn't imagined that Kogure would be pursuing Ohtomo so stubbornly.

Kogure and Ohtomo were classmates from their Onmyou Academy days, and their relationship ought to be quite familiar. He hadn't hesitated to abandon his Independent Officer job, expecting a position where he would pursue Ohtomo, and tonight he had tried mercilessly to chase him down. It was a fact that Ohtomo was moving through the underground, and there was undoubtedly a reason why he was being pursued. But even so, it felt too.....

In the first place, why was Kogure so under Chief Kurahashi's evil influence?

On the night of the incident a year and a half ago, Kogure and Ohtomo had confronted each other around Harutora, who was attempting to use forbidden magic. He had heard that after that, Doman had brought the imprisoned Amami to the scene, and upon seeing the wounded Amami - the figure of the Mystical Investigator Chief who ought to be missing - Kogure had sheathed his sword.

At the time, Amami hadn't been in a state where he could explain in detail, and Kogure hadn't heard what had happened behind the scenes. But he had to have noticed various things for him to have retreated quietly.

However, in the end, Kogure remained in the Onmyou Agency, had now transferred to the Mystical Investigators that Chief Kurahashi was the chief of, and was obeying his instructions. As if he were turning a blind eye to the Kurahashi darkness that he had peeked upon and pretending that it didn't exist.

But on the other hand, Kogure seemed to not have reported Kyouko's divination incident during his confrontation with Ohtomo to Chief Kurahashi. Though there was no proof of that, it was the only thing he could believe judging by the attitude Chief Kurahashi had towards Kyouko and the principal - that was Amami's judgment after an impartial investigation of the circumstances. In other words, he couldn't assert that Kogure was completely on the Chief's side.

... 'Honestly, that stubborn bastard. Is there still any way for us to pull him over to this side..... Or is he trying to tell us not to come.'

Amami had once complained this to Touji, unable to grasp Kogure's mindset.

There would be no one more reliable than Kogure if he rebelled against Kurahashi and helped fight with them. However, if they freely came in contact with him, then in the worst situation it was very possible that they would be captured and brought to the Onmyou Agency.

...What's really going on?

The image of Kogure he had confirmed today was extremely far from the straightforward, cheerful Independent Exorcist that Touji knew. He was like a silent, cruel, and completely cold machine. As if he had become someone else.

What was Kogure thinking right now? That was a source of worry to Amami as well as Touji. Maybe it was the same for the silent Kagami.

But Touji understood something after actually seeing the event.

...Kogure-san isn't 'lost'.

Even if his thoughts were unclear, Kogure's actions themselves were clear and thorough. He would undoubtedly continue pursuing Ohtomo from now on. No, it wasn't just Ohtomo, there was also Harutora. In that case, Kogure had become a 'competitor' to Touji and Amami who were also pursuing the two of them.

...Well, it'll be hard to win from now on.

There was no helping it even if he worried. But even so, it was quite an anxiety-inducing matter. Touji was already putting everything into his lack of development right now.

"Well then, although there's still some time until dawn, nothing's going to come from wasting time in this kind of place. Let's separate for today--"

Amami sneezed loudly halfway through after saying that much.

A stadium in the middle of winter without any heating equipment. Putting aside for now Touji and Kagami who had been in battle, Amami was definitely cold. "Ahh, that won't do." Suisen circled around in front of him, crouching down to tighten Amami's scarf.

"Oh, thank you, Suisen."

"That's why I told you to wear more. You'll get a cold, you know?"

"You can care for me when that time comes. That won't be bad either."

"Daizen-sama, that joke is too much."

"It's not a joke at all. You can make gruel and feed me by hand saying 'ah--'. ...Oh my, that's bad, why do I feel cold all of a sudden?"

"Is that true, Daizen-sama?"

Suisen gently reproached him, but Amami laughed 'hehe' unabashedly. Strangely, Touji's and Kagami's temples both twitched from displeasure at the same time.

"Judging by how they were before..... Are those two always like that?"

".....Yeah, pretty much."

".....You have it tough too."

".....Well, I've gotten used to it."

Touji and Kagami talked in cold voices, moving away from Amami and Suisen.

Then.

"Touji, Ohtomo brought two oni. Those things were Doman's shikigami and not Ohtomo's, is that right."

Kagami changed his attitude completely, confirming again. "Yeah." Touji replied blandly.

"Though I wasn't able to go as far as confirm the spiritual link, I don't think there's any mistake judging by the onis' attitudes. Both of them are quite strong."

"Ho. How are you measuring that strength? Eh, brat?"

"......That's true. That explanation just now wasn't completely. At least, to me, they were incomparably strong."

Touji honestly revised his wording at Kagami's sharp jab. Unfortunately, he didn't have the energy to respond to each and every jab right now.

It seemed that several reports regarding the two oni had reached the Mystical Investigators. Both of them were seen as stabilized mobile spiritual disasters that had existed for a long time. In other words, 'true oni'. It was believed that these two oni were the ones who had commanded the group of shikigami that attacked the Onmyou Agency building when Doman had attacked the Onmyou Academy before.

Though it was astonishing that Doman used these two oni as shikigami, it was hard to say whether the combined strength of Ohtomo leading Doman and these oni together might even be higher than Harutora with Hishamaru and Kakugyouki. In any case, they were out of reach for Touji.

...I can't win against either of those oni. I'm not sure if I would even be able to stop them.

Touji didn't think he would fight with Ohtomo. But that didn't change the fact that he wouldn't be able to win. The 'situations' that Touji would dive into from now on would probably be far more difficult 'situations' than even the one from the night one and a half years ago.

Just then.

"Incomparably strong? Hey. You're getting pretty candid, Touji. As if you're getting used to losing to your lack of power. Commendable."

Kagami snickered with a low voice. Touji looked wordlessly at him with a scathing gaze.

But the next words were surprising.

"I came in close contact with one of those oni when the Agency building was attacked. Just in terms of my feeling from that time..... If you were able to maintain your last form, you'd be able to match it."

Touji couldn't keep his eyes from widening when he heard this. He inadvertently stared intently at Kagami.

He wasn't ridiculing him. Nor did it feel like he was lying. Then, perhaps finding Touji's surprised appearance laughable, Kagami laughed loudly a couple times.

"Surprised? You can't win against a true oni by relying on a living spirit - is that what you believed, brat?"

"Well....."

"Hey, the resurrected Dairenji Shidou said it too, right? The oni in your body isn't any normal oni. I'm also pretty sure of that. Even only considering its incompleteness, it's completely out of the league of a simple 'Type-Worm'."

That was something Kagami had often pointed out to Touji since before.

Amami had also conveyed the business with Yashamaru to Kagami. Along with the 'same boat' phrase that Yashamaru had used.

But Kagami had been watching the oni inside Touji's body before he heard about Yashamaru's business. The condition Kagami had brought up - the condition that he would take the spiritual disaster as his shikigami if Touji transformed completely into an oni - seemed to have been added only because he was interested in the oni possessing him.

Kagami had said this at some time.

'It was the spiritual disaster given rise to by the National First-Class Onmyouji known as the 'Professor', Dairenji Shidou. Also, at the time, that guy belonged to the Lingering Spirit Division of the Imperial Household Agency. Like their name, the Lingering Spirit Division's focus was lingering spirits - 'ara-mitama' like Doman, for example. In that case....."

Dairenji Shidou had summoned a mobile spiritual disaster using himself as a vessel - and there was a very high probability that this oni hidden in Touji's body was an ara-mitama. Kagami believed this.

Of course, he couldn't investigate the truth. Only Yashamaru knew the truth.

.....No, that was wrong.

Touji negated his own thoughts.

Maybe that guy was still investigating right now. She was the one in a position closest to that answer.

"Hey, Touji--"

Kagami spoke casually, but like a carnivorous animal watching prey.

"I said 'become an exorcist' to that Harutora before. If that happened, I'd kick him flying to my heart's content. In the end, that guy went farther than becoming an exorcist and became a terrorist. But he became unexpectedly strong. It's a rare opportunity, and I plan to find that guy in the future and enjoy kicking him flying. Until I get tired of it."

"....."

Touji stared at Kagami without saying anything. Kagami chuckled and glared at Touji.

"So, Touji. You become stronger for me too. You're far from enough as you are right now. There's no value in it."

He didn't need anyone else to say that. Becoming strong was Touji's top priority.

Touji stayed silent, quietly clenching a fist.

Amami spoke again, ending the exchange for tonight. The outside of the windows was still enclosed by darkness.

It was still far from dawn, and the night air was still cold.

Part 4

Eight in the morning. The alarm clock rang.

She had accidentally forgotten to turn the setting off. She had woken up close to dawn yesterday, and hence had planned on sleeping until noon today.

She had also considered ignoring it and continuing to sleep, but she had already woken up while she considered such a thing. Also, the clock's alarm would continue ringing for five minutes.

In the end, Suzuka[30] crawled resentfully out of her blankets, moved to the desk, and stopped the mercilessly-ringing alarm.

Her appearance was bad after just waking up, and she lifted up the alarm clock and glared at it as if wanting to say something. "Haah." But in the end, she sighed and put it back on the table.

She hadn't slept enough, and her eyes were dull. There was a dull pain deep inside her head. Suzuka absentmindedly leaned towards the windowsill, pulling open the blinds. Then, she frowned thoroughly at the light that shone through.

"......Hah. The weather's so nice. So annoying....."

Since the heating and the humidifier had been working all night, there was condensation on the window and the scene across the glass was distorted. Suzuka unlocked the window for some fresh air, but she shivered and immediately closed the window again because of the cold air that seeped in through the slightly-opened window.

Giving up on fresh air, she turned around and turned on the air purifier by the window. In any case, it wasn't any big problem if the air was a bit stale.

Suzuka looked back and surveyed the room.

Suzuka was currently in a room of the Onmyou Agency building. It was a personal research lab that Suzuka had used before. The research lab where she had experimented with the Taizan Fukun Ritual without the knowledge of the higher-ups. She had been sleeping on the sofa here until now, and rolled-up blankets laid there like cast-off skin.

Suzuka had tried to resurrect her dead elder brother using the Taizan Fukun Ritual the summer three years ago. A team of Mystical Investigators that caught wind that Suzuka had been readying forbidden magic had broken in here.

When they scattered and left the research lab, she had been planning on sacrificing her life to complete the Taizan Fukun Ritual. She had never thought she would return to the same place a year later.

It had already been a year and a half since she moved back into this research lab. Come to think of it, this was the most she had used this room. But the situation was greatly different from the first time she had obtained this personal research lab.

When she had become a National First-Class Onmyouji for the first time, this research lab had been Suzuka's castle.

But right now, this research lab was Suzuka's prison.

Also, the position Suzuka currently was in was a situation she was familiar with since childhood.

Her life was dominated by the absolute dictatorial power of her 'father'.

Though this was a familiar situation, on the other hand, to Suzuka who had once experienced freedom - her Onmyou Academy life - it was an extremely laughable suffering.

"......So tired."

Suzuka stifled a yawn, returning to her desk and turning the television on using the remote control. Then, she moved to the inner area of the room where hot water was supplied and started to boil water for black tea.

She took out a bowl and a cereal box from the cupboard, then took out milk from the minifridge and poured it into the bowl with the cereal. She stirred it messily with a plastic spoon that came with a convenience store bento.

After the hot water boiled, she put a teabag into a mug and took a big bite of the still-bubbly cereal. She took the teabag out and added in sugar-saturated milk at the appropriate time. Then, with her mouth filled with cereal, she munched with bleary eyes as she returned to the sofa carrying the bowl and the mug.

There was an apartment room prepared for Suzuka at the moment. It was the apartment for Onmyou Agency employees that had been prepared for her after she entered the Onmyou Academy.

But right now, she spent almost all her nights in the research lab. Even if she took a single step outside of here, she would be monitored and followed, and hence commuting every day was very irritating. She wouldn't feel any more relaxed even if she went back to her apartment, and all form of communication with outside had been cut off. So her life was centered on the research lab.

Of course, although she didn't move because it was irritating, this research lab was undoubtedly being monitored as well. Obviously communication like phone or internet were forbidden, and she wasn't even allowed to possess a cell phone. The only information that came from the outside was from television and some magazines. Just like a prison.

The freedom Suzuka was permitted was only related to the research she had been ordered to perform.

"......Damn. My head really hurts. Stupid alarm clock."

Suzuka unjustly belittled the alarm clock she had used for many years, watching television while sipping her milk tea.

Just then. The door to the research lab was knocked on quietly.

Suzuka's face twisted significantly.

There were very few people who especially visited this research lab. There were essentially none who were likeable. Also, she could only think of one person who would visit before the Onmyou Agency work hours began. Of course, she was one of the unlikeable.

Suzuka ignored the sound of the knock and continued eating cereal. She thought she might go away, but after some time, the door was quietly knocked again.

"......Suzuka? Are you still sleeping?"

A polite voice came from the hallway across the door. 'Are you an idiot', she wondered. She wouldn't be able to respond if she were sleeping. Hurry up and go away. She tried praying hard for that.

Things quieted down for some time again. The television reported blandly on uninteresting news.

But one minute later, there was another knock. It was still quiet, but it wasn't simple. She was gradually feeling impatient. In that case, the one being ignored would start increasing the pressure.

Suzuka rose from the sofa after cursing loudly.

She left the bowl of mostly-eaten cereal on the table, walking to the entrance with a frown. After she unlocked and opened the door, she saw the girl standing in the hallway.

It was a girl one or two years older than Suzuka. An imposing girl with an inexplicable elegant air. But she seemed cautious right now. Though she didn't go so far as being servile, she shrank back in hesitation.

Her defining characteristic was her brilliant red hair.

"......What do you want?"

Suzuka asked irritatedly in a low and completely sinister tone.

The girl was immediately embarrassed, but said:

"H-Hi. Good morning. Uh, I-I wanted to eat breakfast together....."

Suzuka dropped her gaze because of those words and noticed that the girl held a paper bag in her hands. Come to think of it, it had the fragrant scent of bread. Though she had been eating, she felt her appetite being stimulated. Suzuka pursed her lips, saying in a cold voice:

"I just finished eating."

"Ah, I-I see. Sorry for bothering....."

The girl replied with youthful wording[31]. She sounded cheery from what she said, but she looked very frustrated judging by her expression. She slumped her shoulders and said "Bye....." with voice that even sounded sad, planning on leaving the door.

Suzuka's impatience grew even stronger when she saw that girl. She'd feel a bit bad if she made her leave like this - unfortunately, she didn't feel that way. Instead, it seemed as if her stress accumulated.

Suzuka shook her head in resignation with an expression of not knowing whether to click her tongue or to sigh.

".....It's alright. Want to come in?"

The girl immediately looked back, and her glum expression until now brightened in a flash.

"Yeah." A happy smile emerged on Souma Takiko's face like a puppy whose master had forgiven its prank.

Chapter 5 - Blue and Pink

Part 1

".....I'm going to go back to the Onmyou Agency."

When Suzuka said that, everyone present was taken aback and reacted strongly.

"Hold on, Suzuka. Yashamaru - your father - is around the Chief, right? You'll caught easily."

"What Touji says is right."

Tenma also calmly stated his opinion as Touji hastily stopped her.

"I understand that it's difficult for you to stay at the Onmyou Academy in your position. But even so, returning to the Onmyou Agency is too reckless.

Just like Amami said, Suzuka and Kyouko were just like the principal in that it would be very difficult for them to continue a similar life as they had lived until now, even just on the surface. Though she was a student, Suzuka had originally been a special student. She was already a professional - and also a National First-Class Onmyouji who possessed 'First-Class Onmyou' qualifications. She had only come to the Onmyou Academy up to now as punishment for attempting to hold the Taizan Fukun Ritual. In other words, Suzuka's 'ordinary life' for several months stemmed from the will of the Onmyou Agency's higher-ups - Chief Kurahashi.

However, Suzuka had opposed the Onmyou Agency tonight. The situation had also greatly changed now. She would likely be unable to attend the academy as punishment like before.

Most importantly, Chief Kurahashi had Yashamaru by his side.

Yashamaru - Dairenji Shidou - was the man who had used his own daughter, Suzuka's body as an experiment with forbidden magic in his previous life. A man who was both cruel and elegantly heartless, and one who had both cunning knowledge and strength. From the bottom of her heart, Suzuka feared him more than she detested him.

Also, the Onmyou Academy was a place that Yashamaru could reach. Even though he had ignored it until now, it was unsure what would happen in the future.

"You can come with us if it's hard to stay inside the academy. It would be even more reassuring for us if we had a Divine General while we hide underground later on."

Amami couldn't use magic, and he couldn't even move on his own. He was in a situation where reliable people would allow him more aid. There was even less room to be selective if she was a Divine General.

"First off, what are you going to do if you go back? Let me first say that you have no chance of winning."

Touji harshly asserted. Actually, things were as he said. Suzuka knew that as well.

The Onmyou Agency could be called the main base of the 'enemy'. Even if Suzuka sneaked in alone, there wasn't even a one percent chance of victory. She would easily turn into a prisoner.

However.

"......Headband. You're not hiding underground to run away here and there. Didn't you say you were going to train yourself?"

After Suzuka said that, she turned her head. "Kyouko too."

"You're staying in the Onmyou Academy to start your special divination training. Um..... I can't express it well. But the two of you aren't fleeing or escaping, you're acting to become strong. I think that's right. After all, if we keep doing what we've been doing..... we won't be any good. We won't be able to do anything."

Suzuka spoke as if for her own self to hear. But her words also spoke for the feelings of all of her companions.

Tonight, Suzuka and the others had struck back at Kurahashi and Yashamaru. But that was just a miraculous outcome interwoven with various factors including Ohtomo's, Amami's, and Saotome Suzu's assistance. But Suzuka and the others would become scattered from now on and Ohtomo and Amami would be pursued, while Kurahashi and the others' rock-solid position - or even their fighting strength - was almost unchanged. No, perhaps their long period of lying low had ended and they were finally about to act boldly. If there was still a 'next

time', then the brutality and difficulty would be incomparable to tonight's. These companions anticipated that.

"Hold on, Suzuka. If that's true, then that's even more of a reason for you to go with Amami-san and me. Can't you only train yourself while escaping from their eyes and ears?"

"......Unfortunately, my 'strength' isn't the kind of thing that can be increased by training. You understand, right, old man?"

Suzuka crossed her arms, shooting a gaze towards Amami on the sofa. Amami solemnly stared at Suzuka, but the 'Trick Spider' remained silent.

Though Suzuka was the youngest of these people, her spiritual power was stronger than anyone else's now that Amami's magical energy was sealed. But that wasn't her natural power, and it wasn't something she had obtained through training. It was just a result of Dairenji Shidou's experiments. All of the Divine General Suzuka's strength was - ironically - given to her by the enemy, Yashamaru.

Because of that, it was very difficult for Suzuka to further increase that strength by herself. Maybe it wasn't impossible, but she couldn't do it through ordinary means.

"Of course, maybe I can learn ways to use my current strength more effectively. ......But my field of expertise is still 'research'. Therefore, I have to fight 'there'."

Suzuka asserted.

Touji could only shut his mouth due to her words and seeing her expression. "Suzuka-chan....." Though Kyouko murmured, she didn't try to stop her again.

A smile flitted briefly over the corners of Amami's mouth, and he said:

"...Specifically?"

"I'm going to uncover that person's goal."

Suzuka immediately answered Amami's question.

"Didn't you say before? You said that the goal of those people was to 'inherit Yakou's legacy', but you didn't know the contents of that 'legacy'."

"You plan on investigating that?"

"Right. I'll start from inside them after getting into the Onmyou Agency."

Amami's eyes widened in surprise, but Suzuka held herself poised.

"......To be honest, I don't know Kurahashi Genji's true intentions. Maybe he just wants to expand the jurisdiction of the Onmyou Agency. ...But I don't believe that 'his' goal is that kind of thing. 'He' definitely doesn't care no matter what the Onmyou Agency turns into. 'He' wouldn't be interested in that kind of political business. I want to find out what 'he's' trying to do right now. If we're never certain of our opponent's goals--"

We won't be able to fight, right?

Suzuka murmured as if speaking to herself.

Amami arched his brows, putting on a pained expression.

"Honestly, it would be an invaluable if you infiltrated the enemy and spied..... But if you go back on your own, won't the opponents naturally surmise your intentions?"

"Then I'll just make some mistake and get caught on purpose."

"Same thing. Those people won't be tricked like that. Let me tell you, the opponents are quite clever, you know? Are you able to negotiate with those people?"

"Hah? It's not whether I can do it or not, I said I was going to do it. I know I'm different from 'him' right now. I'm already determined to expose 'his' goal. The real negotiations start after that."

Though she was slightly angry, her words were firm. Since she said that much, Amami couldn't say anything more. It would truly be be a great help if Suzuka spied from inside the Agency. More importantly, she was motivated. He couldn't pour cold water on her resolve. Neither Amami nor the principal could assert that their judgments were more correct than the judgments of these children.

However.

"......Is that really alright? I'm going to warn you a third time, Yashamaru's there, you know?"

Touji still spoke with a bitter look.

Among those present, only Touji had seen Suzuka and Yashamaru meeting face-to-face. Touji had witnessed the 'power relationship' between the two of them. Because of this, he seemed to harbor strong misgivings about Suzuka returning to Yashamaru.

At the time, Suzuka had been like a frog stared down by a snake. The psychological factors were greater than the difference in strength between them. After all, he was her father - the father who had controlled her since birth. That terror was carved into Suzuka's soul. He was someone who could be described as Suzuka's natural enemy.

Of course, Suzuka was also conscious of her own absolute fearfulness.

But--

No, because of that--

"......I can't run forever. If I don't conquer 'him', I won't be able to become strong."

Part 2

In the end, just-toasted bread was the best. Though she was in a bad mood, she had to admit that.

"......Thanks."

After she murmured a word, Takiko, who had brought the bread, beamed with a smile.

Takiko was sitting on the sofa Suzuka had been sleeping on until just now. Unfortunately, there was only one sofa, and Suzuka didn't want to sit next to her, so Suzuka had moved over a chair from her desk and was sitting on it.

There were two cups steaming with black tea on the table in front of the two. There was Suzuka's share and Takiko's share. Though she had not a single thought about being hospitable, being excessively unfriendly was also very foolish. Anyways, the effort she spent would be the same, so she had made black tea as repayment for the bread - or rather, as the price.

After all, the girl in front of her was clearly Suzuka's 'enemy'.

But Suzuka had long since realized that there were no ulterior motives in the smile that this 'enemy' showed her.

It had been a year and a half since Suzuka came to the Onmyou Agency of her own will. Takiko would often come alone to visit Suzuka, who had almost no contact with the outside. As their meetings became more numerous, Suzuka naturally came to understand what kind of a person she was.

"It's good that you like it; it was my first time going to that store too."

"What the hell, are you using me as a food tester?"

"N-No! It's because you never watch your diet, Suzuka....."

Saying this, Takiko glanced at the garbage can.

It was already filled to the brim with finished bags of convenience store candy. That was Suzuka's primary staple food right now. Following Takiko's gaze, Suzuka frowned and crossed her legs on the chair. To be honest, that wasn't her business.

"It doesn't matter. I'm just using my own money to buy things I like."

"Your nutrition won't be balanced that way, you know. Also, it's not just your diet. Judging by how you look, you didn't go back yesterday, right?"

"So what."

"It's not good for you to spend the night in this kind of place, and what are you going to do about bathing?"

"......It won't kill me."

"As I thought. That won't do. Suzuka, you're a girl, so you have to keep yourself clean."

"Aah, I can't stand it, you're so annoying."

Suzuka immediately furrowed her eyebrows and glared angrily at Takiko on the sofa.

"And anyways, if you have that many complaints, can't you just issue an order to your excellent shikigami instead of lecturing? 'It's time to stop monitoring her' or 'give her some more freedom' ...Actually, you're imprisoning me, so what do you care about bathing. I don't feel grateful even if you send me food because I'm pitiful, you know?"

Anger and stress accumulated in large amounts every day. What's more, Suzuka's venomous tongue was first or second among the Twelve Divine Generals. She spat curses like a river. Her expression and tone were both calculated to make the other party as unhappy as possible, which was in some sense very remarkable.

Even though she had interacted with Suzuka for a year and a half, Takiko still didn't have any tolerance for this hostility.

Her expression instantly paled. "......Sorry." After apologizing in a mosquito-thin voice, she hung her head.

Takiko became completely feeble after her weak points were jabbed. She would deny it if it were a misunderstanding, but Takiko understood that what Suzuka said was the truth. What's more, she seemed to feel embarrassed. In this kind of time, she couldn't settle things or wave them past, and could only bear the accusations.

Suzuka's stress accumulated because of Takiko's downcast appearance. How should she put it? It was the feeling of an owner who couldn't vent her irritation with an overly rambunctious pet. Her intimacy irked her, but losing her would also irritate her. This girl was truly hard to deal with.

Takiko was her hated father's master. She wasn't just the master of the shikigami Yashamaru, her lineage also made her the same as his master.

That was something Suzuka hadn't known either until she had asked Amami directly. Her father Dairenji Shidou had been named 'Souma' Shidou before. In other words, her father was also a descendant of the Souma family that had assisted Yakou in the past.

But the Souma family had been separated into several lines after the Pacific War. Her father was just from a Souma branch family.

The single remaining person from the Souma main family was the Takiko before her.

Takiko herself had given her explanation of the details of this aspect. The 'princess' that Yashamaru called Takiko probably wasn't a simple nickname. The unknown magic family, the Souma. Takiko, of the age-old 'inner' great family, was a true princess.

...Well, otherwise it would be impossible to explain her unworldliness. Honestly.

In any case, her silence was very annoying. Suzuka, having trouble enduring the silence, deliberately sniffed with a 'humph'.

"Ah - I can't stand it, even the air's getting heavy. Can you not barge into other peoples' research labs and then go silent?"

"S-Sorry....."

"Even the tea's getting cold. I'm going to go boil it again. Want any?"

"Huh? O-Okay."

Takiko raised her head, showing an expression of redemption. Truly a girl who couldn't hide anything and whose thoughts were immediately conveyed on her face. Suzuka definitely couldn't lecture her about those points, but the fact that even she was dumbfounded showed how severe it was.

Simply put, Takiko was a 'pure' girl.

Her feelings clearly shone through, and she was frank and candid. She could also be described as brilliantly naive. Clearly put, she was a type Suzuka wasn't good with. She was probably an ideal candidate for a class representative - an elementary school one.

But the meaning of being pure changed depending on one's position.

For example, if Takiko trusted that what Chief Kurahashi and Yashamaru were doing was 'the right thing' and didn't suspect a thing. If that were the case, then any sacrifice could be permitted as a 'noble sacrifice'. Even if people would be hurt or if she sympathized with them, she wouldn't falter. Also, she would probably take the initiative to put herself forward as a sacrifice if there was a need. That was the kind of purity Takiko possessed.

Also, purity was directly linked with stubbornness and exclusivity. Takiko had quite a bit of those aspects as well. Even fanatics counted as 'pure'.

".....Ah... But it really is annoying....."

"Ah, in that case, let me."

"No need. You're clumsy. .....Ah, right. Are you here, Kumomaru? Why don't you boil it."

Suzuka, who was about to rise from the seat, spoke to the area behind Takiko's back with an irritated attitude.

There was no immediate response. But when Takiko turned her neck slightly and called out "Kumomaru", the aura behind the sofa shuddered and a male figure appeared.

His age looked the same as Takiko's. A young man with a tough yet gentle appearance. Messy hair was tied carelessly behind his head. A military jacket coupled with jeans and high boots. His expression was sharp yet reserved, and in contrast with his active manner of dress, he had a temperament that made him feel like a scholar or monk.

He was Takiko's guardian, Kumomaru. His name in his previous life was Mutobe Chihiro. He was a Yase Doji who had been resurrected after death as Takiko's shikigami, just like Yashamaru - Dairenji Shidou.

"Can I ask that of you?"

"......As you command."

After replying respectfully, Kumomaru walked towards the space supplying hot water.

.....It was truly a fantastic scene, if she thought about it again.

Suzuka thought this as she looked at his back.

She had eaten the breakfast that Takiko, who ought to be her enemy, had brought, and had ordered her powerful guardian to boil tea. Depending on how one looked at it, it might be a relaxed scene, but she hadn't imagined it at all before returning to the Onmyou Agency.

In the end, Suzuka had originally been a prisoner. But Takiko was humble like this because she wanted to be Suzuka's friend. Takiko herself had told her this after all, so it wouldn't be wrong. She suspected that she was being toyed with more than she was surprised, but Takiko was extremely serious.

Suzuka hadn't learned of this directly and had only heard of the situation after the fact, but it seemed that Takiko had adopted the same attitude towards Harutora and Natsume when she had gone to participate in the Onmyou Academy studies before. Though the results were unsuccessful and they had ended up with a rift between them, her wish to become close with Natsume and the others hadn't changed up to the very end.

The matter regarding the Raven's Wing was the same.

Takiko had pulled the trigger on the chain of events linked to Harutora's awakening. If she hadn't done extraneous things, Natsume would have not died, and Harutora wouldn't have awakened as Yakou. At least, not on that night. But Takiko herself had taken action completely and utterly 'for the two of them'. Her motivation had been pure goodwill.

...Troublesome goodwill certainly exists, huh.

It wasn't irony, she believed that.

But speaking of the Raven's Wing incident, she felt that resenting Takiko was also meaningless. It wasn't because she had acted out of goodwill - it was because in the end she was just the 'trigger'.

At the time, the situation had been gradually and perfectly drawing together. Even if Takiko hadn't acted first, then it was undoubtedly just a matter of time until the same outcome developed. No, rather, if Takiko hadn't lost control, then Kurahashi and the others' plans would have been realized even more perfectly, and even the slight resistance Suzuka and the others were carrying out right now might not have been permitted. Hence maybe she had created a flaw in the plans of Kurahashi's side.

Moreover..... Suzuka could actually understand Takiko's feelings. She understood.

She had heard that ever since birth, Takiko had been worshiped by the adults around her as the Souma princess. But on the other hand, they excluded all but relatives from Takiko's surroundings. Never mind friends of the same age, Takiko

didn't even have anyone she knew well. Takiko was raised as the 'Souma Princess' before she was a 'girl'.

Also, though worship and abuse were completely contrasting environments, she was the same as Suzuka in the sense that they were alone. What's more, you could probably say that she had the same environment as Natsume if you interchanged Souma and Tsuchimikado. Since birth, the three of them had borne the karma of 'magic'.

But Suzuka had a brother, Natsume had Harutora, yet Takiko had nobody. She was truly alone.

By supposing if she hadn't had a brother, Suzuka could also easily imagine how deep and consuming loneliness could be. Hence, although it was hard for her to empathize with Takiko's feelings, she could understand.

She longed for human interaction.

That was it.

The reason Takiko came to Suzuka came from that deep yet simple motivation.

But the 'established' reason for which Takiko came to Suzuka was something else.

"......Thank you for waiting."

Just then, Kumomaru returned with the boiled black tea, cups for two of them in his hands. "Thanks." Takiko thanked him while accepting it. Suzuka was spaced out and didn't extend her hand, so Kumomaru put the cup on the table.

Then, Kumomaru bowed lightly and tried to dematerialize. But, "Wait." Takiko stopped him.

"That's fine, Kumomaru."

"But....."

"It's more fun when there are more people. Suzuka, is that alright? Kumomaru should be alright."

Takiko said this, asking approval from Suzuka. She especially used the wording 'Kumomaru should be alright' because she knew that Suzuka loathed Yashamaru.

Suzuka glanced over, meeting Kumomaru's gaze. "Whatever you want." She replied carelessly. Then, Kumomaru nodded to Takiko to express understanding and circled around to the back of the sofa, naturally sinking into a standby posture.

Actually, Suzuka had met Kumomaru a long time ago - or more accurately, she had met Mutobe Chihiro. It was also because Mutobe had been her father's subordinate in his past life, belonging to the Imperial Household Agency Lingering Spirit Division. When her father had still been alive, she had met him on several occasions.

They weren't particularly close, and they hadn't had any interaction other than greeting each other. Though she managed to remember his appearance and name, her father had a great number of subordinates and colleagues. Mutobe was one of them, and that was all she knew.

But from Mutobe's point of view, Suzuka was his boss's daughter. Hence it seemed that he remembered Suzuka very clearly.

Maybe because of that, Kumomaru had answered Suzuka's questions before.

It was not long after Suzuka had just returned to the Onmyou Agency. It had been a coincidental occasion when the two of them were alone, and Suzuka, whose suspicions had grown upon Takiko's repeated visits to the research lab, had asked Kumomaru, "What are you planning?"

"What do you mean?"

"What else could there be. I'm talking about that Takiko; she's your master, right? Why do you let her come to me, an 'enemy', unguarded? What's your goal?"

"......She's not unguarded. I'm by my master's side."

"That's not what I meant! I mean it's very strange that she's coming to me in the first place!"

It was a span of time when she was fearful of falling under her father's control again. Suzuka was practically venting her stress and anger on someone, but Kumomaru didn't show her any hostility.

In addition, he had said with an attitude that could be called cordial:

"I'm allowing my master to become friendly with you because it was her wish. But - Chief Dairenji actively recommended this to put a kind of restraint on you."

Maybe because he hadn't changed his habits from his past life, Kumomaru sometimes called Yashamaru by his title when he had been alive. "Hah? What?" He explained, "Similar to second-class magic", to Suzuka as she ground her teeth.

"If you become close to my master, you'll become unable to betray us again. That's what this is, simply put."

In other words, Yashamaru had let his master come to Suzuka expecting that she would 'gain feelings' for Takiko. Suzuka felt more dumbfounded than angry when she heard this.

Just like Amami and the others had worried, Yashamaru had very quickly seen that Suzuka wasn't obediently surrendering when she had given up. Well, that was certainly natural. Just like she had insisted to Amami, since Suzuka's goal was exposed, any degree of spying would be a victory. He had used Takiko to try taming Suzuka's resolve. There ought to be a limit to looking down on people.

However.....

"It's effective. For sure. Maybe you believe in your mind that your determination won't be shaken by that. But this taming method will bind your 'heart'. If your mind understands, then the effects might be kept to a minimum, but they won't be zero. The only ones who can do that are people who were like that from the

beginning or people who underwent considerable training. Also, no matter how small the effects are, they'll gradually expand and accumulate as time is spent."

At the start, maybe it was a slight change. A relationship where they had never spoken suddenly turned into one where they were greeting each other. Originally she would only say scathing words, but at some point it became a feeling of banter. Her anger had become smiles due to something, and her barrier of disinterest had crumbled gradually bit by bit in the face of their daily interactions. Next, bits of confusion would slip into her originally unshakeable resolve, connect with her clouded judgment, and would later develop into compromise.

Also, those effects were further strengthened on Suzuka, who was in a state of genuine imprisonment. When she was in an environment where she was always under a strong mental burden, it was no easy feat to keep treating someone completely emotionlessly when they showed her goodwill. At least it couldn't be achieved by willpower alone.

People were beings that lived by interacting with others. 'Building a relationship' was a phenomenon rooted in this nature.

"......What the hell. Disgusting. ......Also, even if you have that kind of goal, is it fine to expose it to the target?"

"It doesn't matter. The Chief doesn't care even if I tell you. Also, even if the target knows about these second-class methods, they'll still be effective over time. Didn't I say? 'Emotions' are things that bind the 'heart' rather than the 'mind'."

Though Kumomaru spoke casually, Suzuka's hairs suddenly bristled as she listened. She had an illusion as if they were dissecting the human mind as they chatted.

That was the terror of the father that Suzuka knew. An 'inhuman' presence existing deep within Dairenji Shidou. Back then, Suzuka had clearly understood that the man Mutobe possessed the same kind of terror as her father.

But--

"Also..... I don't think this is bad, even if it's the Chief's second-class magic. No matter what form it is, my master will be able to make a friend - that's something to be happy about."

When he murmured this, Kumomaru let her catch a glimpse of something that her father didn't have - a glimpse of 'emotion'. In any case, she had started viewing Kumomaru as 'alright' since that conversation between them.

".....Suzuka? Are you not going to drink any?"

"Huh? Ah....."

Suzuka was summoned back from her recollections by Takiko's voice, and reached her hand to the cup on the table. She held the cup with both hands and took a sip, still sitting cross-legged. Maybe she was still haunted by lack of sleep, but she felt like her mind was still fuzzy.

When she had made the decision to return to the Onmyou Agency, she had been scared inside about how she would be treated.

But she had never thought she would be placed in such a padded, gentle environment. Maybe it was certainly relaxed, but she couldn't successfully hold herself firm because the outside pressure was weak.

Then, maybe concerned about Suzuka's appearance, Takiko showed a slight look of worry.

"Are you busy with work?"

"Hah? .....Ah, yes. There's a lot I have to do."

After replying with that, Suzuka thought of something again and made an unpleasant face.

"Hey, though I'm sorry for what I said before, could you let me use the internet once in a while? It's so inconvenient."

"S-Sorry..... But, Suzuka, you're an extremely confidential case right now, so....."

".....So you can't permit it for safety reasons? Honestly."

Suzuka drank her black tea, still wearing a displeased look.

Suzuka was currently being directly entrusted with certain research by Chief Kurahashi. Simply put, it was 'soul magic'. Suzuka had only been punished because she had ventured into this realm, but once she joined their side, he immediately and secretly appointed her to this research. That was one reason you could call Kurahashi quite thick-skinned.

There were many magics classified as forbidden under current Onmyou law. But even among those, magic related to souls was different from other forbidden magic. It was especially regulated and people using it would be severely punished. To all practitioners, it was even more taboo than being simply illegal.

One reason was that it would be a problem from an ethical standpoint.

And another more concrete reason was that in the past, Tsuchimikado Yakou had failed at soul magic, and a great spiritual disaster had happened in Tokyo because of it - at least that was commonly believed. In other words, the danger level was different from normal forbidden magic.

However, Kurahashi himself, who was in a position where he ought to ban forbidden magic, seemed to have used this kind of soul magic several times before in secret. Actually, the Kumomaru who was currently present could be called a product of soul magic as well. The soul of a person who had once died was reawakened as a shikigami.

...Though I realized before, this group of people is the 'bad guys'.....

When Kurahashi had assigned her with this research, her father, who had been next to him, had explained this to Suzuka.

The 'Taizan Fukun Ritual' referred to a system of magic that connected one to the high-level spiritual entity 'Taizan Fukun' in order to manipulate human souls.

Though he had told her this very casually, it was an incredible thing. A high-level spiritual entity, or in other words, a 'god'. Something that the 'General Onmyoudou' system of magic classified as a 'god'.

Come to think of it, she had once talked about the same topic when they had visited Ohtomo's hospital.

The living things of this world were filled with aura. Aura constantly drifted around and stayed stable as a whole, but sometimes factors would lead it to become miasma. Those were 'spiritual disasters'.

Onmyou law referred to these spiritual disasters by Phase according to the degree of imbalance.

First, an imbalance of aura turning into miasma that was estimated to be unable to naturally revert was a Phase One.

When one could observe physical damage created by the miasma, it was Phase Two.

When the miasma materialized and became a mobile spiritual disaster, it was Phase Three.

If the miasma created from the mobile spiritual disaster quickly became more spiritual disasters, and a chain of spiritual disasters occurred, it was Phase Four.

That classification was just a presumed benchmark for the 'state' of the spiritual disaster, and even spiritual disasters of the same Phase exhibited quite large differences of 'strength', but it was useful as a metric to express a spiritual disaster's danger.

Then, spiritual disasters that reached Phase Four would condense further. The imbalance of aura based around that spiritual disaster would no longer become a

local 'imbalance'. It would become a 'true state' and would transform into a new type capable of filling anything.

That was a Phase Five. Also known as the Final Phase.

But the theory about the last phase was a simple hypothesis that no one had actually proved. It was the theory advocated by none other than Yashamaru - Dairenji Shidou - before his death. Also, Yashamaru and Kumomaru had belonged to the Onmyou Agency Lingering Spirit Division before their deaths, the department that had performed research related to Phase Five.

.....Magic that controlled a 'god'.....

In the system of modern magic, the deities that had been objects of faith in the past were all viewed as spiritual entities. Only the difference that they had been worshiped distinguished them from behind the same thing as spiritual disasters.

And although such a thing couldn't be found in 'General Onmyoudou' - and they were all designated forbidden now - there were several magics that explained 'gods' as spiritual entities and used them in Imperial Onmyoudou, the basis of General Onmyoudou. If Yashamaru was telling the truth, then the Taizan Fukun Ritual was one of those examples.

Suzuka had been entrusted with that research. With that, it was reasonable that she was being strictly monitored. After all, it was a crime. Actually, she had never thought that her clearly hostile self would so quickly be entrusted with such central work. Maybe she was being looked down upon to this degree, but it was indeed something she wanted.

...Just that order would be enough as evidence to denounce Kurahashi Genji under the law.

But just like Amami said, the entity that captured magic criminals was the Mystical Investigators, the Onmyou Agency.

No one other than an Onmyouji would be able to tell whether the research Suzuka was carrying out was illegal or not. No matter how Suzuka chased after Kurahashi, that issue still remained.

...Also, that was the same for the 'goal' of these people.

Yashamaru and the others already controlled the Taizan Fukun Ritual. Even so, they still had Suzuka carry out research because they still hadn't reached a complete understanding of the Taizan Fukun Ritual system of magic. They entrusted Suzuka with research for a deeper, vaster, and more accurate understanding of the Taizan Fukun Ritual.

But she didn't think that was everything.

She still hadn't proved it. It was just Suzuka's instincts, but--

...Their 'true goal' was something else.

Suzuka's research was probably one step in their goal. And when she thought about what their true goal was, their 'identity' that she had never deeply considered until now immediately surfaced.

That is, relatives of the Souma.

"....."

Suzuka sipped the black tea in order to conceal her mouth with the mug. As she did that, she stared at Takiko who sat before her and Kumomaru behind her back.

Until now, Suzuka had basically been clueless about the 'Souma family' business. It wasn't just Suzuka; most Onmyouji were like that. The Souma and the Tsuchimikado were unlike the Kurahashi in that they were generational great families on the interior of the magic community. Also, they had intervened in the military to assist Yakou during the Pacific War era and had scattered after the defeat. Of the old people born before the war, excluding for now the people who were related, almost all Onmyouji would fail to react even if they heard the name

'Souma'. Just like when 'Souma' Takiko had appeared before Harutora and the others.

However, the information had been left behind.

The history of the Souma was very ancient. Though it wasn't commonly known, they were quite ancient. Though they had inferior origins and legitimacy, they possessed a history even longer than the Tsuchimikado.

Also, just like the Onmyouji Abe no Seimei who was the ancestor of the Tsuchimikado, the Souma also had a certain famous person as their ancestor. At least, that had been passed down.

That person was currently worshiped as a 'god'. In this 'Tokyo'.

"....."

Suzuka slowly sipped her black tea. During that time, her gaze stared at Takiko - and Kumomaru.

Allegedly, Kumomaru and Yashamaru were Takiko's 'Yase Doji'.

But that was an impossible thing in the first place.

The so-called Yase Doji[32] was a name referring to a certain 'group of spirits', as well as a name referring to any member of that group. Also, they were spirits that could only be used by 'a certain bloodline' of the nation. Martyred souls that served that 'bloodline' during their life became guardians and still served that 'bloodline' after death. Only those guardians were Yase Doji.

They were - the spirits that served the royal family.

...However, those guys[33] had been called 'Yase Doji'. That meant.....

Actually, in Japanese history, there was only one person who had been called the 'Imperial Prince'[34]. A person who tried to lead a rebellion against the imperial court and who led to historic chaos.

The Imperial Prince, Taira no Masakado.[35]

An ara-mitama. A 'god' famous as a lingering spirit.

Also, he was viewed in legend as the ancestor of the Souma.

"....."

Suzuka pondered. She though seriously.

Souma, the magic group whose ancestor was the self-proclaimed Imperial Prince Taira no Masakado. Takiko, who succeeded this lineage, served by the Yase Doji Yashamaru and Kumomaru.

Also, Taira no Masakado was currently worshiped in Tokyo as a 'god'[36]. He was a powerful and famous lingering spirit included among the three Great National Spirits[37].

What's more, Yashamaru - Dairenji Shidou - and his trusted subordinate Kumomaru - Mutobe Chihiro - had belonged to the Imperial Household Agency Lingering Spirit Division in the past. There, they had researched the Taizan Fukun Ritual, magic linked to a 'god'.

Also. Yashamaru and Kumomaru called Takiko 'Princess', but sometimes they also called her 'Shaman Princess'. Shaman.

Needless to say, the so-called shaman referred to people who served 'gods' and listened for divine intent. People responsible for duties connected with 'gods' in ancient times.

What was the deal with all of these things? What did they mean?

"....."

Bit by bit.

Bit by bit.

The parts that had been scattered everywhere until now were starting to draw out a giant pattern. After getting this close to them, Suzuka's eyes finally saw it.

No, she didn't see it. They had showed her. As if deliberately making openings, they had declared their 'true identity' bit by bit in front of Suzuka.

This was evidence that they were gradually approaching the final point of their goal. Their goal had already slowly reached the phase where 'it's not a big problem even if others know'.

Also, it was evidence that they were 'trying to tame' Suzuka, like Kumomaru had said.

Actually, there was a fact that she hadn't been aware of at all until after she returned to the Onmyou Agency.

Her father's old name was 'Souma' Shidou.

In other words, Suzuka was also a Souma.

"......Suzuka."

"....."

"Suzuka?"

She finally returned to her senses after being called out to consecutively. Takiko smiled lightly, interested in Suzuka's panicked return to consciousness.

"It looks like you really are exhausted. And it looks like you didn't get enough sleep."

"......Shut up. I'm not tired."

"Really? If you're feeling bad, I can leave."

"I said, I'm not feeling bad. ......Ah, but, hurry up and go back if you're going to leave. You're a hindrance."

"Ehh? That's mean."

It seemed that even Takiko could calmly deal with hurtful words of this degree. Though she furrowed her brows in a troubled manner, it was the expression one showed to a close friend.

Suzuka wasn't used to these direct feelings of affection. You could say she was bad with them. Especially when she was careless. "......Tch." Suzuka clicked her tongue and turned her face away as if escaping, unsure of how to respond to the smiling Takiko.

...Emotions' are things that bind the 'heart' and not the 'mind'.'

Kumomaru's words flashed through her mind. Effective. Definitely not zero. Suzuka bit her lip, hatefully recalling those words.

When she had been reunited with her resurrected father, he - Yashamaru - had naturally treated Suzuka as being on his side. Suzuka's - his daughter's - actions and attitude didn't even count as problematic to him. As for why, it was naturally because Suzuka was her father's daughter. To her father, that was the same as her being under his absolute control.

Or, to him, maybe it was more so that they were 'both Soumas' than being father and daughter. The unbroken, continuous chain of an ancient bloodline linked Suzuka as well.

.....Stupid. Don't be ridiculous. Who would get caught up over this redhead.....

Suzuka said this to herself. Also, she turned on the turned-off television in order to express 'I'm tired of talking with you'.

Then, she inadvertently froze.

"Alright, the New Year's Ceremony's grand finale put on by the shikigami manipulated by the academy students has finally started. Look, various kinds of shikigami, from the valiant and majestic to the slender and beautiful, are showing themselves onstage.

It seemed that the television was showing a broadcast of the New Year's program.

The Onmyou Academy.

It was the underground magic practice field of the Onmyou Academy building that Suzuka had once studied at.

"Ah, I can't believe I forgot. The Onmyou Academy's New Year's Ceremony was today. I had Satake remind me, but I completely forgot."

Takiko spoke with a regretful expression.

But she immediately looked happily and ecstatically at the screen.

"The Onmyou Academy underground, huh..... How nostalgic. To think it was two years ago that I had a mock battle with Natsume there....."

She muttered somewhat sadly. Anguished feelings from the past and guilty feelings about what she had given rise to swirled back and forth in her heart.

But when the screen showed a certain person, Takiko unconsciously rose from the sofa.

"It's Kyouko! Look, Suzuka. It's showing Kyouko!"

Kyouko's figure was clearly shown in front of where Takiko pointed. She wore the Onmyou Academy uniform, the girl's pure white uniform, standing tall and controlling the two defensive shikigami Hakuou and Kokfuu as if confronting something. The figure of a friend seen after a lapse of one and a half years. Was it an illusion that she looked much more mature than before? It felt like her already-great figure had grown a step further. What the hell. She was so cunning. She even had a charm that she hadn't had before. But it wasn't disagreeable. In addition, she was still extremely pretty. She seemed more mature, maybe because she had a serious face on. She probably wouldn't look much different if she smiled. She was definitely annoyingly nosy just like always. And with a multitude of expressions. Cheerful, merry, and amicable. She would hug people like toys at the drop of a hat, but proudly lecture people as if she were an elder--

'Bzt'. A noise sounded out and the television turned off. "Huh?" Takiko looked back at Suzuka in surprise.

Suzuka's back was hunched and her head was lowered, still sitting cross-legged on the chair. Her right hand was extended, pointing the remote control at the television.

The thumb of her right hand that gripped the remote control was pressed down on the power button.

"S-Suzuka? What's wrong? We got to see Kyouko.....!?"

In front of the confused and flustered Takiko, Suzuka slowly put her arm down and tossed the remote control onto the table.

She said with a lowered head:

".....I have to start work."

"Huh?"

".....You're in the way."

Her voice was cold and extremely faint. Takiko stood still in confusion.

However.

"...Princess. It's time to leave."

Kumomaru urged her gently from behind.

Takiko nodded obediently, her expression still tinged with nostalgia yet also showing concern for Suzuka.

".....Suzuka. Thanks for the tea. I'll come again."

After leaving those words, she left the research lab with Kumomaru.

When Takiko and Kumomaru left, it felt as if the room suddenly became vaster. Suzuka changed her sitting position, holding her knees and curling up on the chair this time.

She had never once thought that she would be this intensely shaken. But seeing the figure of a friend after half a year had destroyed Suzuka's shell in one blow - the shell protecting her while she was in the center of the enemy base. The feelings that Suzuka usually kept hidden from herself spilled out freely.

Loneliness. Sadness. Pain. She wanted to see her.

She couldn't stop them. Suzuka shut her eyes desperately and tightly to suppress the tears that were about to fall, gritting her teeth with all her might to endure the sobs leaking out. How unfair. She was doing her best, doing her best with everything she had, but why did her chest hurt so much just from seeing her friend? Her affection for her friends became a blade that sliced at Suzuka. She wanted to throw everything away and escape from here.

Who cared about the surveillance. She could use everything she had to hold back the people in the way and go right away to the Onmyou Academy where Kyouko was. That was a blinding, sweet, and intense temptation. A blissful poison. But at the same time, it was also trap that battered at her resolve from that night. Suzuka endured. She hugged her knees on the chair, putting her face into her knees, curled her body into a ball, and desperately endured with everything she had.

She didn't know how long she was like that for.

She finally regained stability from the waves of emotion. Suzuka gingerly stretched out her body that was stiff from overexertion.

She slowly took a deep breath.

Her face was very hot. The corners of her eyes were probably red. But that didn't matter. She had calmed down.

It seemed like she had reacted particularly intensely because of the sudden blow. Suzuka's gaze fell on the remote control she had tossed on the table.

Hesitation.

Would she succumb to temptation if she turned the television on again now? The shell she had put back up had to be no weaker than before, right? She wasn't sure. She couldn't answer. After Suzuka stared at the remote for a while, she suddenly gripped the remote with her left hand as if recalling something.

She closed her eyes and turned her head, pointing the remote control at the television. She stuck her thumb straight out.

Like that, she tried tapping the button once. If the television didn't turn on, then she would immediately put the remote control on the table and start work again. A test of her luck. No, it was divination.

"......!"

She pressed the button.

'Bzt', came the sound of the power turning on.

Then, when Suzuka's body unconsciously froze up, she heard the reporter's belated yet strangely excited voice.

Suzuka looked back in surprise.

That instant, the image shown on the television clearly and beautifully entered Suzuka's eyes as if she were viewing it live.

The beautiful and slightly empty opening of the Onmyou Academy New Year's Ceremony.

But the latter description might stem from Kyouko's bias[38]. Though the New Year's Ceremony was a broadcasted performance meant to improve the image of Onmyouji, it was by no means ineffective. Actually, the audience of the first and second-year students and the media in this magic practice field were clamoring noisily.

The flow of the program was consistent with the rehearsal they had held yesterday. After the principal's speech, there was a ceremonial demonic aura purification. Then, there was the shikigami summoning and manipulation by the third-years.

But Kyouko was in an absent-minded state. Her coincidental viewing of Ohtomo's star yesterday still hadn't left her mind.

Touji and Amami ought to still be pursuing Ohtomo's whereabouts. The monitored Kyouko and Miyo hadn't gotten in touch with the two of them, but how many clues had they uncovered right now? According to rumors that were secretly whispered in the residence, it seemed that Ohtomo was currently lurking in a secret society of the magic community and moving in the shadows. The ominous appearance of the star she had seen yesterday made her worry.

Also, apart from this, the feeling from yesterday's divination that she hadn't had before still clearly lingered with Kyouko.

To be honest, if the New Year's Ceremony hadn't been today, she would have faked illness and stayed home from school to rest. She really wanted to try divination again while she still remembered that feeling. Though she was also worried about Ohtomo's star, the hope that 'maybe I've gotten the trick to divination' was more powerful. If she could re-experience that feeling of her own will, then Kyouko would have advanced a great deal. When she thought that, she couldn't stand cooperating with the current broadcasted performance.

That said, Kyouko had been assigned to a team responsible for manipulating the shikigami in today's program, and she had been chosen as one of the individuals controlling the very first unique shikigami and not as one of the members of the group dance. Since there was a need for excellent students who wouldn't fail the performance, she wasn't permitted to oppose or feign illness. Right now she could only follow along and participate in the program.

...Yeah. The New Year's Ceremony will end in the morning, and my stomach started hurting at lunch..... No, I was feeling bad from the morning, but I managed to hold on just for the performance. With that reason.....

As Kyouko watched the demonic aura purification solemnly carry on from backstage, she wished for it to hurry up and end. Of course, that kind of second-class magic was ineffective, and the ritual was carried out at a gradual crawl.

Is it going to be night soon? The ritual finally ended when Kyouko started to wonder that. She couldn't help but vigorously applaud at the end, busily adjusting her strength.

Anxiety and irritability.

But Kyouko had become a bit more spirited compared to yesterday. Though Kyouko herself hadn't noticed, just seeing signs that her training was bearing fruit had invigorated her.

Not long afterwards, it was time for Kyouko to take the stage. Kyouko moved forward from backstage with the other selected members.

Halfway through, Tenma entered her vision from a different class. Eh? Her gaze inadvertently paused.

Tenma was a member of the group dance, and hence he took the stage after Kyouko and the rest. But he didn't look well, maybe because he was already nervous. Come to think of it, it seemed like he had messed up several times during the rehearsal yesterday. It seemed that he still wasn't good at practicals, just like before.

She was a bit comforted by how Tenma hadn't changed.

Then, Kyouko summoned her defensive shikigami Hakuou and Kokfuu, just like the rehearsal.

These two were Onmyou Agency-created defensive shikigami named 'M2 Yaksha', and they were equipped with a katana and a spear. Kyouko positioned Hakuou and Kokfuu to her left and right. After the music started sounding in the arena, the shikigami were made to perform a sword dance in tune with the song.

Kyouko was currently focused on training her divination, but she had also trained in other first-class magics with a serious zeal that she had never had before. She was even much more skilled at controlling Hakuou and Kokfuu than before. Actually, the two defensive shikigami clearly moved differently from the shikigami that the other students manipulated. It wasn't a simple matter of speed, it was the dexterity of their movements.

The waiting period had been particularly long, but when the actual manipulation started, it was a short effort. After the music stopped playing, Kyouko put away her shikigami's weapons and bowed deeply to the audience with her shikigami. Applause more enthusiastic than that of the demonic aura purification rained down. Kyouko and the selected members walked off the stage, surrounded by applause.

Up next was the grand finale of the New Year's Ceremony. The group dance of dozens of manmade shikigami. Dozens of students, including Tenma, quickly jogged to their various positions.

It had already been published what was going to be performed next. The first and second-year students and the media intently watched the arena. Kyouko, returning backstage where she had originally been, tried searching for Tenma's figure. Found him. His face was pale from tension. Calm down, she encouraged him from her heart.

Then--

.....Ah.

Again.

This time, it was in an instant shorter than the blink of an eye. Her consciousness rose up. The universe spread out in her vision. A faint light flashed before her. Tenma's star.

This was the star that Kyouko had 'seen' first on that night.

"......!?"

The current divination left her the instant after it visited, like a passing breeze. Kyouko's heartbeat jumped powerfully, but fortunately she didn't show it on her face.

Her heart thumped loudly like a crashing wave.

When she came to her senses, music was sounding through the arena again. Then, the students sang together in front of Kyouko as she pondered her premonition.

"Shikigami, rise! Order!"

It's alright. Completely alright. It'll definitely go successfully[39]. Tenma had continued saying that to himself hundreds of times since the New Year's Ceremony started.

He had finished all the preparations during the period of time since dawn. Fortunately, the shikigami charms at the base were things that had been slowly readied since a long time ago. Though he hadn't thought of using it in this kind of way, he wasn't sure when there would be a better time to use it. But choreographing the entire spell in one night had been more work than he imagined. In the end, he hadn't been able to sleep, and hence his spiritual energy was worrisome.

...But.....

Tenma put his hand in his pocket, tightly gripping the protective charm hidden there.

The demonic aura purification ended, and the New Year's Ceremony moved on to the shikigami controlling portion. The students currently manipulating shikigami were the group of third-years who were particularly good at controlling shikigami. Kyouko was at the center.

Even though Kyouko was in the middle of the selected members, she seemed to stand out. Never mind her shikigami controlling technique, she gave off a general

feeling of beauty. It seemed that this was even going to be broadcast on television today, so maybe Kyouko would become the main attraction.

Also, for some reason, Kyouko's mood seemed slightly different from today. Maybe it was an illusion, but she seemed in a slightly good mood.

...Did something happen?

In any case, this was a good omen. Definitely. Tenma nodded and said 'yeah' to himself.

He had waited a year and a half.

Also, the letter that had finally been sent was probably the first sign of the 'change' after the long wait. And that change was a 'good change'. That was definitely true.

Not long afterwards, Kyouko and the others finished their dance and the magic practice field was filled with applause. Tenma's applause mixed in with the applause around him, but once it was time for him to take the stage himself, he started feeling incredibly nervous again.

It's alright. It's alright. It'll definitely go well. Though he said that to himself again, he was still shaken no matter what.

Then, the selected group walked off the stage. The signal was given. Tenma and the others, the students responsible for the group dance, jogged to their various positions. His heartbeat accelerated vigorously as they moved.

He reached his position. He breathed deeply.

Recalling now, it was the night of that incident. When he had infiltrated the Onmyou Agency alone by Saotome Suzu's instructions.

Though Tenma had been unsettled at the time, he had understood how dangerous of a bridge he was crossing. Actually, he still had dreams of it sometimes. He had

been helped by Amami too, not just Saotome. He had only managed to be saved due to various overlapping factors.

However, at least he had crossed a dangerous bridge with his own two legs. That was the truth.

...Is this anything special, compared to that time?

It's alright. It's alright. It'll definitely go well. Right as he thought that, music sounded through the arena.

Now, Tenma finally changed his attitude.

In the end, everything had already been set up. The dice had already been cast. After this was only the final push.

Then, the tone of the music changed. The surrounding students inhaled and refined their magical energy. Tenma also followed.

"Shikigami, rise! Order!"

In the end, Tenma failed quite spectacularly.

"Hey, I didn't think we would be able to check in this way."

"Yeah."

Touji smiled and spoke in agreement to Amami's cheerful words. It was really quite nice.

The two of them were in the secret base they were currently using. Suisen happened to be out buying daily necessities right now. They didn't have anything like furniture, since it was just a temporary hideout. All that was set up was a small folding table. Touji had a laptop computer opened on that table right now, and was watching a television broadcast with the wheelchair-bound Amami.

The broadcast was of the Onmyou Academy New Year's Ceremony that was currently being held. Also, Kyouko was being shown right in the center of the screen. Kyouko was awe-inspiring and beautiful as she coolly commanded Hakuou and Kokfuu, stealing the attention of the viewers. Though she had been shown on the screen multiple times recently, the feelings of the cameraman for wanting to do this were extremely understandable.

"I feel like if I saw Miyo-chan's successor holding a performance before, it would have seemed like playing around..... But being able to see Kyouko-chan like this isn't bad. .....Damn. Feels like my eyes are heating up....."

Like his words implied, Amami's eyes were a bit moist as he watched the broadcast. It was an extremely rare occurrence for the stern and self-composed Amami.

But..... A year and a half. Also, it hadn't been any simple year and a half. A long, silent year and a half that he hadn't experienced before until now. The figure of a friend he hadn't seen since the start of this time. Even Touji was deeply moved. The despondence from Kagami last night - just several hours ago - seemed to have dissipated in a flash.

Touji sat on the ground next to the wheelchair, one leg in front of him and one knee on the ground as he relaxedly looked at the screen with one arm on the table. This kind of stable mood had been absent for a long time.

"It's the feeling of meeting an estranged granddaughter. Truly something to be grateful for, as someone who crawls in the shadows."

".....I wanted to ask this a while ago."

"Hah?"

"Amami-san, did you perhaps have feelings for the principal before?"

"Hah. Well. Ah, Miyo-chan was a charming girl when she was young, but Tsuchimikado Yakou noticed her and she gained 'divination', right? After the war ended, the famous Kurahashi family treated her like the apple of their eye. While

I was a fledgling, low-level employee. It would be quite scary to say I had feelings for her."

Amami cackled nostalgically.

"But..... Just between you and me, Kyouko-chan's a beauty surpassing Miyo-chan. She has quite the body. .....Hey, you heard me, right? That's just between us, okay?"

"...Understood."

Touji endured a laugh and promised Amami as he urged sternly.

Not long afterwards, Kyouko stopped dancing in the screen, bowed, and walked down the stage. Amami clapped his hands. Touji had the same feelings, but it felt embarrassing, so he just watched Kyouko go.

".....This broadcast."

"Hmm?"

"Was it by Chief Kurahashi's instructions?"

".....No. I don't think that guy would personally make such specific orders. But in the sense of opening the doors to the industry, it goes in his direction. In other words, it's proof that those around the Chief will go in the same direction as him even if he doesn't make specific orders.

After the Onmyou legal reform, the atmosphere of the industry was turning towards a direction different from before. The traditional, closed-off magic community was gradually becoming more traversable. It definitely wasn't a bad thing, and it had to be admitted as the achievement of Chief Kurahashi.

Kurahashi had his secrets. Secrets that he couldn't divulge no matter what.

But at the same time, he was currently allowing the industry to develop. Infusing it with new vitality. That was bringing benefit to many people and also further strengthening his momentum. Resisting him was equivalent to opposing the

people who had benefitted from him. Also, to those people, Touji and the others were totally 'evil'.

".....We've really picked a troublesome fight."

".....Do you dislike it?"

"How could I. It's just what I want."

Half of that was forcing himself. But the other half was his true feeling. The future of the magic community and the future of the Onmyouji were unimportant to Touji. Maybe Amami was concerned about that, but it had nothing to do with Touji. Maybe it would be nice if everything went in a good direction, but if that was only established with the sacrifice of some - the sacrifice of Touji and his friends - then what did the fortune of others matter? He could only oppose with all his power.

Kyouko was also fighting on the other side of the screen. He couldn't lose to her.

Then, an announcement sounded on the scene and a large number of students started to move to replace Kyouko and the rest. It looked like this was the group dance put on by the students' shikigami.

".....So, we saw Kyouko-chan, but what about that boy Tenma? It would be nice if we caught a glimpse of him."

"I don't know, that guy doesn't stand out."

Though Touji smiled wryly, his gaze scanned the image, searching for the figure of his friend.

Tenma was indeed low-key and didn't stand out. Touji tried looking for him, but as expected, he didn't find him.

He didn't see Tenma's 'figure'.

"Shikigami, rise! Order!"

The students threw out shikigami charms together in the image.

Then.

"...Uh? Hey, what's this?"

Amami murmured in astonishment as he watched the broadcast.

"Isn't this the group dance? Did something happen?"

Amami's eyes widened and he leaned his body slightly forward from the wheelchair.

In contrast, Touji abruptly stood up.

As if he had been kicked hard. He couldn't stay still. His eyes were so wide that they were almost popping out, his lips were tightly pursed, and his clenched fist shook. He stared at the screen with a burning gaze. "Touji?" Amami spoke up out of surprise, but Touji didn't reply even though the voice reached his ears. The cells in his body were practically scorching.

For a moment, Touji was silent--

His whole body shuddered from emotion and joy.

"Amazing..... You're incredible, Tenma....."

"It's Tenma?" The dumbstruck Amami hastily returned his gaze to the image because of Touji's whispered voice. But he narrowed his eyes and scrunched up his eyebrows, maybe because he couldn't find him at all.

But that was natural. Touji hadn't been able to spot Tenma's figure either. But even so, Touji found 'Tenma' in the screen of the broadcast before him.

In addition, there was someone else.

".....Amami-san, you don't understand?"

"W-What is it?"

"You don't understand, huh. Then the people at the Onmyou Agency won't be able to understand. Damn, well done.....!"

"Hey, Touji. What exactly is going on?"

Touji finally turned his head to the confused Amami.

A magnificent smile emerged on his face, and he said:

"It's a message from Tenma. Natsume's back."

Part 3

The midsummer morning feel gradually drew stronger as quiet determinations formed one after another in the villa's living room.

Kyouko and principal Kurahashi returned to the Kurahashi residence together and would start 'divination' training.

Touji and Amami would hide underground and pursue Harutora and Ohtomo.

Suzuka would return to the Onmyou Agency and spy on the goals of Yashamaru and the others from within the agency.

It was easy for all of them to say, but they were harsh - and laborious - choices. All of them would throw themselves into brutal environments. Also, they didn't know when it would be over.

Most importantly, it was also very painful for the friends to become scattered. Until now, they had compensated for each other's immaturities to confront various hardships. However, from now on they wouldn't be able to rely on their friends. Also, it would be difficult to help each other.

"You basically won't be able to communicate with each other from now on. We'll definitely be exposed once you communicate. It won't just be you, the person you're communicating with will also be endangered. Keep that point in mind."

From now on, all other than the two who were going into hiding would probably be placed under the Onmyou Agency's surveillance. If they acted rashly, they would quickly draw the attention of the enemy.

Of course, they had decided on an emergency plan - though a very simple one. For example, if something changed about the situation, then the relatively-unrestricted Touji and Amami would move. The others couldn't take action and would only be able to accept this. Though that was quite one-sided, the priority for now was to feign normalcy.

Even if they were alone, they had to finish their own battles on their own battlefields. That was the path these friends had chosen.

"You all will definitely be fine even if you split up. But don't overwork yourself, alright? Mental fortitude is the most important thing in the face of adversity."

The students nodded obediently to the principal's emotional recommendation.

"......The next time we meet, we'll all be here. When that happens, we'll all gather to beat up Harutora and lecture Natsume."

Touji spoke slowly while gritting his teeth. Though they hadn't said it, Kyouko and Suzuka had the same feelings.

But.

"......I....."

Tenma, who had been silent for some time, couldn't help but speak up.

As his friends' gazes focused on him, he said with an anguished look:

"I..... I'm sorry. I don't know what to do. Although I thought about whether I could do anything for everyone....."

Tenma spoke apologetically.

Unfortunately, Tenma's power was clearly the lowest among his companions. He didn't have 'divination' ability, nor the strength of a living spirit, nor was he a Divine General. He was just a student. Though no one blamed him for that, Tenma blamed himself. He felt ashamed at himself for not even knowing how to help his friends.

However.

"Tenma, you wait on 'standby'."

Touji declared assertively. "Eh?" Tenma looked at Touji in surprise.

"I'm going to hide underground from now on. Kyouko's returning to the Kurahashi residence - maybe she'll be locked inside the house. Even if she isn't, she'll probably be closely monitored. If Suzuka goes to the Onmyou Agency like she plans, it's very likely that she'll be restrained. In other words, if Harutora and Natsume try contacting us, you're the only one they can turn to."

"...!"

Tenma's eyes widened in surprise from Touji's assertion.

That was indeed true. Without knowing where everyone was or whether they were being monitored, Harutora and Natsume would be unable to plan for contacting them. Though it was unclear whether the two of them would come in contact or not, they shouldn't abandon that possibility.

"So you go back to the Onmyou Academy and live the same life as you've had until now. Don't be concerned about us. That's your mission."

"But everyone's going to suffer from now on, but I'm just..... I-If I'm not going to suffer like you all, then at least let me help you."

"How?"

"Well....."

Tenma himself had declared at the start that he honestly didn't know how. The battles from now on were individual battles. There was almost no room for other people to help.

Seeing Tenma with his head lowered, Touji moved to his side. He put his hands on his shoulders and said to the surprised Tenma in a firm voice:

"Listen, Tenma. It's all because of you that we haven't been killed yet and are able to talk about the future like this. When Kyouko, Suzuka, and I charged recklessly, you were the only one to take a different action. That's why we were able to bring Harutora back."

"T-That was Saotome-san....."

"No, it's the same. Tenma. You're the 'unique' one among us. Divine Generals, divination, and living spirits - and Tsuchimikado or Yakou reincarnations - we all gathered here because we have our unique strengths. On the other hand, we're a group of similar people who all share the characteristic of being 'abnormal'. But in a group of similar people, once one of us gets defeated, we'll all be destroyed the same way. That was what happened last night."

In some sense, this was Touji's repentance. Last night, Touji had been the first one to mention sneaking into the Onmyou Agency. Though he hadn't invited others, he had ended up endangering his friends and almost getting them all killed. In this sense, Touji had been saved by Tenma last night.

"We were able to keep from being destroyed because there was one person who was 'different' mixed in with our group. Because of a 'normal' student in a group of 'abnormals'. You don't have to do the same things as us. Even if you become a burden to us, we'll protect you. So you support us in your own way - in a way that none of us can do. That's the meaning of being a 'team'."

".....Touji-kun....."

Tenma murmured. Touji just nodded and let go after expressing that.

Then, "Touji's right." Kyouko smiled at Tenma.

"Actually, Tenma, you're the only one that Harutora and Natsume can reach. That's impossible for us."

"......In the first place, even though you said 'everyone's going to be suffering from now on', even you're going to be marked by the Onmyou Agency in the future."

Suzuka was the one who continued on with this. "Me? Why?" She sighed loudly at the wide-eyed Tenma. "You don't understand how big of a thing you've done? You were the only one who fooled the Chief and the rest during the events yesterday, you know? ......Well, that said, you're just a 'normal student' in the end, so you won't be monitored as much as we will..... But they won't ignore you like before."

Tenma would be identified sooner or later as the one who had infiltrated the Onmyou Agency last night. The Onmyou Agency wasn't so incompetent that they would let that go. "Are they going to arrest me?" This time, Amami gave his opinion to the confused Tenma.

"...No. It wouldn't be much of a feat to arrest an underage student. Right, if the Mystical Investigators are in charge, they'll deliberately leave you alone and observe the situation."

"Eh. In that case, won't it be more dangerous for Harutora-kun and Natsume-chan to come to me--!?"

"From now on, you'll frequently be in danger no matter what you try to do - or even if you don't do anything. Well, the enemies will also move cautiously in that regard. Otherwise it would be unsightly."

"....."

Tenma fell silent again.

Though he wanted to do something for his companions, he didn't know what to do. Also, if even he was being monitored, acting rashly would endanger his friends even more.

Standby. Touji had said this, and he also understood the meaning of leaving a channel[40] open. But he still felt uneasy about hiding away by himself.

"Tenma-kun--"

The principal was about to speak, but Amami raised his hand lightly and stopped her.

Then.

".....Do what you think you should do."

Perhaps he had seen through Tenma's dilemma. Amami spoke extremely sincerely.

"Boy, even though you're thinking hard now, there's nothing for you to do, right? Then don't do anything. Continue thinking later on." Amami spoke to the confused Tenma, then gazed at Touji, Kyouko, and Suzuka.

"We're not going to be able to communicate like this in the future, right? So then what? All you can do is act as you judge according to your own beliefs, right? The situation might change in a flash. When that happens, you can only rely on yourself. Think hard and make your decision based on your thoughts. That's what 'standing up on your own' means."

His words, bearing an inexplicably frivolous tone, unraveled the tension entangling Tenma. In But it also solidified the unstable ground beneath Tenma's feet.

Indeed, 'standing by' was the only thing he could think of that his current self could do. But he couldn't be satisfied with that. He had to constantly continue thinking about whether he could do something else.

More importantly, the situation would change. Even Amami couldn't predict how things would turn out after this. Later on, Tenma and the others who were along would only be able to rely on their own strength to grab hold of the best strategy. They would think for their friends in their own ways.

Tenma and the others were a destined group. Regardless of whether the actions of any individual were good or bad, they would affect the others.

But there was no meaning in being a team if he shrank back out of fear for affecting them badly. That was why Amami said what he did. He had said to keep thinking. He had told him to think on his own and make a decision.

It wasn't just limited to his own self. He had to act while being responsible for the well-being of his friends. Only then would a 'team' be useful.

"....."

Amami grinned, confirming the resolve forming in Tenma's eyes. Then, Tenma faced Touji, Kyouko, and Suzuka, and nodded wordlessly.

Their battles were starting at this moment.

The basis of a fugitive life was not to make a move. Though things would get extremely busy when something happened, life was just a waiting game otherwise. That definitely wasn't a bad thing to Akino, who disliked bothersome things. Even if Akino wanted to space out for several hours, it wasn't a big deal. And since there was food for three meals a day, in some sense it was a dream world.

But that was limited to when she was by herself.

The difficulty of a fugitive life was that there wasn't much personal time. If Akino were by herself, she would be fine with looking up the sky idly the entire day, but when there were others around her, she couldn't slack off like that.

"Akino, let's practice stealth magic today."

"Ehh--, again?"

She had finished breakfast and was sitting on the tatami watching television - the only working appliance that had been left behind in this house. Natsume, who

had finished washing the clothes and cleaning, came from the kitchen and spoke to Akino.

Akino turned her head back from where she sat on the ground and looked up at Natsume. "Akino?" Seeing her unhappy upward gaze, Natsume held back a smile and reproached her.

"Do you understand our position? If you take the time now to properly master stealth magic, it'll definitely be useful during an emergency."

"I-It's alright. I'll run away if it's an emergency. I run very fast....."

"No. Running and stealth are used in different situations. You have to be able to do both."

"I won't go near anywhere dangerous....."

"No. Danger will come to you."

"T-Then after dark, I'll....."

"No."

Uuu--. Natsume let out the wry smile she had been suppressing as Akino's chin furrowed with strange wrinkles.

Akino had realized after living together that this first friend of hers was an incredibly diligent girl. In contrast to Akino, who wouldn't do anything at all if she weren't instructed to, she would diligently finish the things she ought to do even if no one told her to. Also, once she got free time, she would ask Takahiro and Chizuru to teach her and refine her magic power. Never mind playing around, she didn't even get any good rest unless the people around her reminded her to. Akino found it hard to believe. She was practically a saint.

Also, Natsume had turned her godsent diligence towards Akino. Though Akino had gone with her at the start because of how refreshing it was to be with a friend,

Natsume's training was strict and didn't feel at all like having fun. It became uncomfortable and tiring very quickly. But Natsume never abandoned it.

"Come on, the weather's good too, let's do it in the courtyard. Akino, your spiritual power's not weak, so you'll be able to do it very quickly once you get the hang of it."

"......Okay..."

Though she still looked a bit unhappy, Akino was urged by Natsume out to the courtyard.

Regardless of what Akino said, she was very obedient as she had been grown up in a monastery. Also, being with Natsume was extremely fun. Of course, it was difficult, and she would occasionally want to play around.

"Uuu, so cold."

"Then let's start with a review of last time. Do you still remember the hand seal?"

"Uh....."

Akino crossed her fingers together.

They trained for an hour like that.

When Natsume mentioned that it was time to rest, Akino was already exhausted.

Though stealth magic wasn't a magic that really stood out, she had to maintain mental focus for a time she wasn't accustomed to, and so it really exhausted her mind. Lasting an hour was quite hard to do for a beginner student.

Akino had often seen the ajari and seniors training when she had been at Seishuku Temple. Although Natsume's training looked easy based off that experience, she realized that it was quite harsh after actually trying it. It was definitely because she never let up and was always using full power. Natsume looked so gentle, but she was merciless when doing things.

"I'm already completely exhausted..... Natsume, you're too strict....."

"Hoho. But Akino, aren't you keeping up well?"

"Maybe, but I'm already at my limits, okay? I can't continue, alright?"

"You look like it. ...They're coming out, you know? Your ears."

Akino's face rapidly reddened when she was told this and she raised her hands to try concealing the top of her head. But it wasn't very effective. The two ears that had suddenly extended from Akino's head were materialized on the other side of her raised hands.

Rabbit ears covered with white fur.

And a small, round rabbit tail also grew from her rear. Normally, the two were dematerialized and hidden, but when she was shaken, careless, or completely exhausted like right now, they would come out before she realized it.

Akino was an extremely rare 'rabbit' living spirit. That was the reason why her foot speed was extremely fast and her spiritual power was quite strong.

"It's been a while since I saw Akino's ears."

"Ugh. It's all because Natsume's training was so Spartan."

"Sorry. But it's still cute. They match you very well."

Natsume smiled and praised Akino with a sincere expression. The eyes beneath Akino's glasses slightly reddened because she still wasn't used to being praised by others.

Though Natsume called them cute, those ears were the root of Akino's inferiority complex. Just being a rabbit living spirit made her feel like a rare animal, but having rabbit ears growing from her head made her look very stupid. Hence, even with other living spirits, she would normally keep them hidden.

That said, she hadn't been as concerned as before recently when it was around Natsume. At this point, hiding it immediately was a bit pointless, so she decided to let them show for a while.

The two of them sat on the porch together. Natsume was taller height-wise, but when Akino was taller counting her ears when they were showing. Natsume smiled happily, looking at the constantly swaying rabbit ears. Though it was as embarrassing as always, Akino also felt sincerely happy if Natsume was happy. Akino extended her ears of her own free will, saying:

"Um, Natsume."

"What."

"Do you think these ears are related to my parents?"

"Well....."

Akino felt a bit dispirited by Natsume's pause.

Akino had grown up in Seishuku Temple since she was small, but it seemed that she had distant relatives in Tokyo. Allegedly, they were part of an ancient great family that had old connections with magic. Though Akino was currently being cared for by Tsuchimikados, it was supposedly until she met those relatives.

The name of those relatives was 'Souma'. Accordingly, Akino's full name was Souma Akino.

But the Tsuchimikados - including Natsume - became inexplicably vague about Akino's relatives past the name Souma. Although they were helping her look for now, that explanation was still essential. After all, Akino had been all alone since birth, and hence she became very interested after learning that she had relatives, albeit distant ones. But everyone reacted the way they did, so she normally didn't mention it on her own.

Natsume looked bleak right now as well. "S-Sorry. You don't know even if I ask about it." So she hastily terminated the topic.

Though she was interested, she had never met them, and they were distant relatives that she hadn't believed existed until recently. Her friend Natsume and the Tsuchimikados who took care of her were decisively more important of the two sides.

Also, although she still wasn't good at dealing with Yasuzumi, both Takahiro and Chizuru were nice and cheerful. There must be various reasons that they were keeping her in the dark. Then there was no need for her to actively poke at things. That was what Akino believed.

"Ah, yesterday was great."

"Eh? .....Ahh, you mean the letter?"

After she diverted the topic somewhat forcefully, Natsume also - although maybe it was her imagination - was relieved.

"Is that person going to properly read it?"

"Tenma-kun will definitely read it. Because he's extremely nice and thinks for his friends."

"Oh. He was a good person, although I only talked to him a bit."

"Really? According to what Uncle said, you were incredibly nervous and closed your eyes, so you didn't even see his face properly....."

"T-That's not true!? Though I was a bit nervous..... But I did see his face and talk to him properly, okay? Didn't I get him the letter?"

Akino's ears fluttered as she made excuses for herself. Natsume's eyes were a bit wicked, but she smiled gently.

Though Akino had been the one to deliver the letter with her own hands, Takahiro had gone with her at the time as well. Takahiro had been in the shadows on guard for prying eyes and ears in the surroundings. It seemed that he had prudently observed Tenma after school and checked whether he had any contact

with the Onmyou Agency after they delivered the letter as well. In contrast, Natsume hadn't followed along. Though she had been quite hesitant, she had said 'I won't know what to do if the enemy notices us' and had stayed at home. Akino thought that she should at least see his face even if they couldn't meet, but it seemed that Natsume's feelings were very complicated.

That boy was Natsume's past classmate, one of her important friends. To Akino, whose only friend was Natsume, he was one of Natsume's friends other than herself, and she had been quite concerned before they met. No, she was still concerned now. What kinds of conversation had Natsume had with that boy before? When she thought about that, she became very uneasy. Maybe she was jealous.

"Well, I was finally able to help Natsume with something."

"What do you mean, finally? Akino, you've always..... been helping me out."

"......You paused for a while there."

"Ah, no, I was just thinking about specific examples."

"......Couldn't think of any?"

"T-That's not it. Uh, didn't you help fold the washed clothes yesterday? And the day before you helped clean the house with everyone....."

Natsume's smile stiffened because of Akino's glare and frown, and she secretly averted her gaze. In any case, she still didn't have anywhere to go after coming down from the mountain. That was why she was particularly concerned about Natsume's friends. That was definitely it.

"What will that person think when he reads your letter, Natsume?"

"Well. I'm also very interested. .....But, I hope he doesn't get involved with any trouble because he accepted the letter."

"That talk again. .....It's alright. Takahiro-san said nothing happened too."

After he had returned yesterday, the letter had been quite a hot topic. But the letter was today's topic as well because to Akino - and to Natsume even more - this matter wasn't finished because they had handed over the letter.

That letter ought to tactfully convey Natsume's current circumstances. Natsume's feelings were also conveyed to some degree.

But Natsume's longing for her friends didn't end there.

As for why--

".....But it's really sad to finally manage to write a letter but not be able to get a reply."

Akino said that as if to console her, but Natsume lightly nodded her head. Though she smiled at Akino, it was a lonely smile.

Even if it could be surmised from the letter Akino had given that Natsume was the sender, all other information had been carefully kept hidden. That was to avoid any leakage of information in case the letter fell into hands other than his. Of course, they hadn't written about the house they were currently living in, and so he couldn't make a reply even if he wanted to.

Also, though Akino hadn't read the words of the letter, Natsume had told her about the contents to some degree.

It was almost all apology. For bringing him huge troubles that night a year and a half ago. For being unable to come in contact for a long time after that. For possibly making them very worried. For only sending this kind of letter and not going to meet him.

If he got involved with her, he would be troubled even further, and so, sorry. It seemed that Natsume had apologized like that several times in that shot letter. She had said she was doing fine.

Natsume had said she had always wanted to apologize. She had used yesterday's letter to apologize for the moment.

But Natsume's feelings couldn't progress. Although Takahiro had warned her beforehand and although she had already realized that - it didn't change the anguish of it.

".....Maybe I've troubled Tenma-kun."

"Eh?"

"After all, I suddenly apologized to him for something a year and a half ago by letter..... Tenma-kun has his own life right now....."

Natsume spoke in a quiet tone like normal, but even Akino understood that she was forcing herself. No, rather than forcing herself, maybe she was deliberately talking about negative things to balance out her feelings.

Akino often did similar things. People would put up defenses beforehand when they predicted pain. Doing things to hurt themselves beforehand to get used to pain was one of those defenses.

Akino wanted to say 'that's not true', but she didn't give it voice. Because Akino didn't understand the boy Momoe Tenma. She didn't understand Natsume's other friends either - her companions. It was meaningless if Akino, who didn't understand anything at all, frivolously consoled her with words.

.....Or was a simple consolation better than nothing? She didn't know. Natsume was the first friend Akino had ever made. Akino still hadn't learned what to do when her friend was in pain.

But, at the least.....

".....Ugh."

She turned her consciousness towards the top of her head. The rabbit ears sticking out. She slanted her head towards Natsume who sat next to her and stroked Natsume's head with one ear. She kept her face pointed towards the courtyard because she was embarrassed. But she looked sideways to see whether she was surprised.

Natsume's eyes widened in shock at the sudden touch.

But when she saw Akino who was trying to console here even while she looked straight ahead with a reddened face, she smiled warmly. Akino was relieved.

Of course, Natsume's melancholy[41] wouldn't go away from just this--

"Natsume-chan!"

Suddenly, Chizuru's voice came from the house, and then she sprinted to the porch.

She spoke to Natsume and Akino who turned back in surprise:

"The Onmyou Academy's performance is being broadcasted on TV! The girl they're showing right now was Natsume-chan's classmate - a girl called Kyouko? The Kurahashi." Natsume was dumbstruck. Then, she rose and jumped up onto the porch. She passed by Chizuru's side and went into the house. Akino also hastily followed afterwards.

The television was placed in the living room. When Akino caught up, Natsume was standing motionless in front of the television. Takahiro was sitting on the tatami next to her watching the broadcast.

On the screen was showing an idol-like, pretty girl wearing a similar kind of uniform as Momoe Tenma's - but a white one instead of a black one. A white and a black shikigami were materialized to either side of the girl and were elegantly slashing their katana and spear.

Returning, Chizuru said from behind them:

"Oh? That girl's Kyouko-chan, right?"

Natsume didn't immediately reply. She couldn't. She stared blankly at the screen as if her entire body were frozen. But her eyes suddenly became moist and she nodded to affirm Chizuru's question. First in a whisper, then louder, and then finally in a trembling voice, she answered: "......Yes."

Akino also stared at the girl shown on the screen with wide eyes, then looked back towards Natsume. Natsume stared straight at the girl. Various emotions spilled from her face.

She looked to be smiling and crying, and even angry. But if the expression that emerged on Natsume's face were to be expressed in a single word, it would be 'moved'. It was the first time in Akino's life that she saw an expression as deep and intensely emotional as the one that emerged.

"......Kyouko-san..... Looks like she's doing very well....."

Natsume muttered tearfully.

Akino returned her gaze to the television again. This girl was Kurahashi Kyouko. A name she often heard from Natsume. Natsume's friend, like Momoe Tenma. An extremely pretty person. And cool. Also, since Natsume kept talking about her, she was definitely a good person. A jealous pang twanged deep inside her heart, but she didn't care about such things after she saw Natsume's current expression.

"Natsume. That's great, you saw your friend's face."

After Akino said that, "Yeah." Natsume nodded. For some reason, Akino became slightly happy. Behind the backs of the children, Takahiro and Chizuru glanced at each other, smiling slightly.

But maybe because they had run here halfway through, her dance ended soon after. The girl bowed amidst the applause and walked offstage. In her place, other students moved forward in large numbers.

What was starting next? Akino stared intently at the screen.

"Ah. Natsume. Maybe they'll show that Momoe Tenma person from yesterday? Maybe you can see him, even though you can't meet each other!"

Natsume's depression would probably fade somewhat if she were able to see the face of her friend who had received the letter. Akino spoke believing this, but Natsume smiled tearfully for some reason.

"Yeah. But there's so many students..... Also, Tenma-kun's..... not really someone who stands out."

When Natsume replied, the sound of the students chanting incantations came from the television. Akino hastily prepared to look back at the screen--

But she stopped halfway through when she noticed Natsume's expression change.

Natsume's expression, which had calmed down slightly after seeing her friend's figure, suddenly went pale. All of its emotion vanished as if her soul had escaped.

Akino was taken aback by the abrupt change, but she had seen Natsume's current reaction at the monastery once. She would show that kind of expression when she was truly shocked from the bottom of her heart.

Akino said--

"Natsume... are you alright?"

Though it seemed like Natsume heard Akino's worried voice, Natsume couldn't respond.

"Hmm?" Chizuru felt confused as well.

"What's that? Is it the group dance? The movements aren't consistent at all - wait, that's completely wrong. Did one of them lose control?"

She spoke out of shock, surprise, and later worry, but even if those words reached her ears, they didn't reach her heart, and her mind didn't understand. Takahiro muttered "Hmm--" and stroked his bearded jaw. His eyes were sharper than before as they watched the screen, but it just entered a corner of his vision, and he wasn't conscious of it.

Natsume's soul was nailed to the television image.

The shikigami group dance performed by the students. The ones dancing on stage were 'M1 Attendants' and 'M3 Asura'. Both were commercially available general-purpose shikigami. There were fifty in total. The movements for the dance performance had probably been originally coordinated expecting a group of fifty shikigami.

However, the shikigamis' movements were completely uncoordinated. Maybe it was because of the shared spell, but when they tried to make the same movement, the movements of each of them were stiff, and there was even one in the center that was experiencing lag[42]. The anchors covering the broadcast were also confused and excited.

Takahiro stared at the screen for a while, and then muttered, "......I see, it's someone's prank."

"What do you mean, prank?"

"Yeah, it looks like a shikigami charm that originally wasn't intended was mixed in with the group spell. Therefore, the supply of magical energy isn't enough. Also, the base spell went out of sync too because of the extra shikigami. It was added nicely to the spell, but some of the minor adjustments failed. ......But if it's a prank, then the culprit is probably quite outstanding, since he wasn't able to test the spell before it activated.

My, my. Takahiro voiced his thoughts with that kind of expression. Chizuru, hearing the explanation, furrowed her brows in suspicion.

Then.

"But..... It's extremely pretty."

Akino said as she watched the screen.

Those words also reached Natsume. Natsume had the same thought. Right. It was extremely pretty. She hadn't seen that beautiful scene since that summer night.

Takahiro and Chizuru looked at each other, perhaps surprised at Akino's naive thought. "A prank, huh." Chizuru murmured.

"Why would someone do this kind of thing?"

"Who knows?"

"Who did it?"

"Hey hey, kids. I'm not clairvoyant or a detective--"

"It was Tenma-kun." Natsume asserted as if to cover Takahiro's wry words. Takahiro, Chizuru, and also Akino looked back at Natsume in surprise.

Still engrossed in the scene on the television, Natsume said:

"Tenma-kun's replying to the letter."

On the other side of the screen, the 'Attendants' and the 'Asura' moved stiffly.

On the stage.

But if one surveyed the entire arena, they would notice the small figures of beautiful, free, and agile shikigami flying through the vast space.

A group of blue swallows.

The manmade 'WA1 Swallow Whip' shikigami manufactured by the Witchcraft Corporation.

Unlike the general-purpose shikigami, the 'Swallow Whips' weren't all moving the same way as they flew. Certain ones traced out strange paths, often turning and often rapidly descending as they flew freely through the air. However, there was an overall coordination. Their movements looked unrestrained, but actually they were flying while considering the movements of the other bodies. They moved individually, but became one entity. As if it were a message.

Then, the exteriors of the 'Swallow Whips' changed slightly. All of the swallows held a certain object in the front of their beaks.

Something thin and fluttering in the wind--

A pink ribbon.

Natsume's expression instantly crumpled.

How far out had he thought this? Were the insufficient magical energy and the disorderly spell really mistakes? Maybe he was extremely anxious and pale-faced right now. Or did he not mind it?[43]

It was as if her friend's unadorned voice reached her from the other side of the screen.

Welcome back.

Also, I won't let you get away.

'Swallow Whips' were binding shikigami.

These shikigami were second-class magic that Tenma released at Natsume, who had tried soaring into the night sky alone, magic to keep her close to her friends. Even if they couldn't meet, even if they couldn't communicate, it tied Natsume to her friends' sides.

Kyouko, who in the same place, also saw the same scene. Maybe Touji and Suzuka were watching through the broadcast. Also, maybe Harutora was as well. Maybe the friends from a year and a half ago were watching the same scene and receiving the same message. That would be nice. She hoped it were true.

Tears trickled from Natsume's eyes. Even so, Natsume couldn't blink as she continued watching the same scene with her friends.

The grand flurry of 'Swallow Whips' joyfully continued with no end in sight.

Part 4

"......Got it."

Suzuka found that file in complete darkness, relying on the light of a small penlight[44].

There were countless libraries in the Onmyou Agency building. After all, it was a government institution, so there were tons of management information and accounting numbers, and they also kept countless books of magic. The magic-related objects weren't put in a database, and there probably wasn't a single person in the Agency who knew where every single thing was. It was even possible that mysteries of magic that hadn't seen the light of day and were still unknown to man slept within the countless libraries.

But what Suzuka just found was a report unrelated to those romantic notions. It was a file of the Mystical Investigators.

"....."

After Suzuka sat down on the ground, she held the penlight in her mouth and rapidly flipped through the file using the illumination of that beam of light.

It had already been seventeen hours since Takiko visited the research lab in the morning bringing just-baked bread. It had just passed two in the morning now. Though there was basically no one left in the agency building, she had still turned off the library's lights for caution's sake. If Suzuka took a single step out of the research lab, she would be followed closely by surveillance shikigami, but she had hijacked them momentarily by forcing a camouflaged spell into them. She couldn't guarantee that she wouldn't be exposed, and it was hard to stay calm.

Suzuka had been provoked by the television broadcast she had watched this morning. The shikigami group dance finale embellishing the Onmyou Academy New Year's Ceremony. The 'Swallow Whips' in midair during the dance were doubtlessly not part of the plans for the performance, and it was clear who had planned them.

She couldn't stay still after being shown such a thing.

Right now, Suzuka had started seeing the enemy's blueprints in her eyes bit by bit. Also, that was evidence that the enemies' goals were gradually approaching their ends. That wasn't something so easy to see. Suzuka had been able to realize this because of the second-class magic cast by their arrogance.

What was their goal?

Until now, scattered parts had slowly depicted a huge magical pattern. But Suzuka had seen a large part of it. It was the biggest 'move' among anything they had done so far.

The spiritual disaster terrorist attack.

The 'Great Hinamatsuri Purification' and the 'Hinamatsuri Repurification'. Two complex spiritual disasters brought about by humans in Tokyo on the same date. Emphasizing the threat of the Twin-Horned Syndicate had expanded the jurisdiction of the Onmyou Agency as a countermeasure. Amami had believed that was the goal of the strategy, self-profit. That was undoubtedly one facet of the truth.

But was that really it?

If they wanted to expand the jurisdiction of the Onmyou Agency, then there ought to have been a multitude of methods. Why had they deliberately chosen bringing about spiritual disasters? More importantly, there were two. On the same day, Hinamatsuri.

"....."

She had already been in the library for three hours. Suzuka's face showed exhaustion. But the zeal that had emerged in her eyes didn't show any sign of cooling down. She looked through the file without letting up.

Then.

"......Tch."

She clicked her tongue and tossed away the file. She let go of the penlight in her mouth and leaned backwards, putting her hands on the ground.

"Not this either..... The Mystical Investigators really didn't collect much information on the Lingering Spirit Division....."

Immediately after the first spiritual disaster terrorist attack occurred, the Mystical Investigators infiltrated into the Twin-Horned Syndicate's stronghold of the Imperial Household Agency Lingering Spirit Division and caught all of its members. But allegedly, most of the information in the Lingering Spirit Division had been destroyed afterwards. Because of this, the Twin-Horned Syndicate continued being a mysterious secret society even after a sweeping investigation.

"......The goal of the spiritual disaster terrorist attack....."

Two spiritual disaster terrorist attacks, and both by manipulating Tokyo's aura flow, caused by disrupting the spiritual stability inside the city. Hence, the numbers of naturally-occurring spiritual disasters still rose even after purifying the spiritual disasters caused by the terrorist attack. That had already been confirmed by checking the database of the Exorcist Bureau.

But mysteriously, after the number of spiritual disasters grew, it didn't return back to normal after the aura flow was stabilized. Though it was better than right after the spiritual disaster terrorist attack, the numbers didn't return to where they were before the spiritual disaster terrorist attack. They had definitely increased. One step after the 'Great Hinamatsuri Purification'. And one more step after the 'Hinamatsuri Repurification'.

"......Come to think of it, these few years I've always been hearing rumors that there aren't enough exorcists..... That also started after the spiritual disaster terrorist attack."

Because the baseline number of spiritual disaster occurrences increased, it surpassed the workload of all the exorcists.

Of course, the Exorcist Bureau - or at least the Exorcist Command Room - had long since known the relationship between the spiritual disaster terrorist attack and the number of subsequent spiritual disaster occurrences. But how many people were there who were paying attention to the meaning hidden in this? Even if there were such people, it had already been a year and a half since the Twin-Horned Syndicate had been swept clean. There probably wasn't a single person

left who was concerned about why they had brought about spiritual disaster terrorist attacks in the past.

The Twin-Horned Syndicate had certainly been eliminated.

But the people controlling them from behind were still alive.

Also, there was one more concerning thing.

The main culprit of the 'Great Hinamatsuri Purification' was Suzuka's father, Dairenji Shidou. He had been pulled into the spiritual disaster terrorist attack he himself had caused and died. Then, he had been resurrected as Yashamaru.

The main culprit of the 'Hinamatsuri Repurification' was her father's subordinate, Mutobe Chihiro. He had killed himself after causing the spiritual disaster terrorist attack. Then, he had been resurrected as Kumomaru.

What was the relationship between those facts and their goals? Or had they just simply become shikigami after dying?

The 'Great Hinamatsuri Purification' had happened four years ago. The aura flow had been greatly disrupted. The number of spiritual disaster occurrences had increased sharply.

Two years later, not long after the disrupted aura flow regained stability, they caused the 'Hinamatsuri Repurification'. The number of spiritual disaster occurrences had further increased.

Then, it had been two more years until now. The aura flow that had been disrupted by the spiritual disaster terrorist attack two years ago had already completely regained its stability.

On the other hand, their goal seemed to be gradually nearing its end, and had already gradually reached the phase where 'it wasn't a problem if people knew of it'.

She had a bad premonition.

Of course, it was just a prediction. Suzuka had never gotten ahold of 'certain clues'. Right now, she couldn't rush to conclusions.

But she couldn't sit still and wait.

After all, until the next Hinamatsuri, there was only--

"......Only two more months....."

Just then.

"You're working hard so late. How motivated you are, Suzuka."

The library lights turned on. Suzuka's body went stiff, then goosebumps rose over her entire body and she rose from the ground as if she had touched a piece of ice.

When she looked back, there was a young man in front of her. A young man with a fashionable and refined air. But he also gave off the image of a corrupt aristocrat. He wore a shirt and vest, slacks, and an ascot tie. He wore white gloves on his hand and had a round lens over his right eye - a monocle glinting with light.

He was Takiko's shikigami and Suzuka's past father, Yashamaru.

"......!"

Suzuka's face paled as she looked at Yashamaru. Yashamaru was no different from usual, showing a 'gentle cold smile' as he looked at Suzuka.

"I haven't seem you for a while. Happy New Year."

"....."

Suzuka didn't reply. The work she had done to the surveillance shikigami had been exposed. Though she had realized the danger, maybe she had stayed too long.

But ironically, although she had fooled the surveillance shikigami and snuck out of the research lab, she hadn't obtained any results to show for it. The files she had found were far from a decisive blow that could expose their plans. Originally, Yashamaru and the others had used Suzuka knowing that she was a double agent. Then maybe they wouldn't punish their stupid captive who hadn't accomplished anything at all after slipping past the surveillance.

As Suzuka pondered those things:

"I knew it. Next time will be for real."

Yashamaru grinned as he spoke. She felt as if her heart was being unconditionally squeezed.

"You should research properly until that time. I'm expecting a lot of you."

Yashamaru suddenly vanished after only saying that much. He had dematerialized and left. But even though Yashamaru left, Suzuka's heart still felt the intense feeling of being enveloped by those white-gloved fingers.

Suzuka couldn't move, standing frozen in the library. Her breathing trembled lightly. She couldn't control it on her own.

Suzuka gritted her teeth and closed her eyes with a pained expression. Then, inside her eyelids, the trails of blue and pink she had seen back then repeated themselves again and again.

Again and again. Until the sensation vanished from her heart, again and again.

Translator's Notes and References

1. Jump up ↑ A youthful, commercial neighborhood of Tokyo.
2. Jump up ↑ Her Japanese characters probably mean something of the sort.
3. Jump up ↑ A chewy rice cake. [1]
4. Jump up ↑ A temple in Bunkyo, Tokyo.
5. Jump up ↑ May not be correctly translated. Does the Japanese version have English text?
6. Jump up ↑ Essentially, she's isolated as well as admirable.
7. Jump up ↑ I have taken some liberties with this simile. I'm not completely sure if it gives the same idea as the original text.
8. Jump up ↑ An addition to a building.

9. Jump up ↑ A term for a formal and highly uncomfortable way of sitting. One kneels on the floor and rests the buttocks on the heels with the top of the feet flat on the floor.
10. Jump up ↑ A thick jelly-like dessert.
11. Jump up ↑ I believe the Yaksha are humanoid and look like big robotic action figures.
12. Jump up ↑ ~5' 11", which is huge for Japan.
13. Jump up ↑ In the Japanese version, she speaks about herself as if she were an old woman.
14. Jump up ↑ A Japanese doll. Look it up on Wikipedia or watch Nichijou.
15. Jump up ↑ Literally Ox-Head.
16. Jump up ↑ Literally Horse-Face. Gozu and Mezu are guardians of the underworld in Chinese Mythology. If you remember them, they are the one who lent their shadows to Douman during the fight with Ohtomo.
17. Jump up ↑ Recall that the Yatagarasu (of which the Raven's Coat is one) has three legs.
18. Jump up ↑ The second exclamation may have a better translation, but I can't figure it out. 要灭却心头 in Chinese.
19. Jump up ↑ This sentence also references the second exclamation of the oni a couple lines before, the one that's untranslated, and makes some pun or ironic statement about it
20. Jump up ↑ Rough translation. Essentially, small steps can eventually overcome longer strides.
21. Jump up ↑ Chinese philosophers.
22. Jump up ↑ A Chinese philosopher.
23. Jump up ↑ Idiom. Translated roughly.
24. Jump up ↑ I'm guessing this is a saying.
25. Jump up ↑ Roughly translated idiom.
26. Jump up ↑ Derogatory. Saying that it's something easily learned from a book.
27. Jump up ↑ He is not using spirit sight.
28. Jump up ↑ I believe some of the prior portion was a flashback, though it's hard to point out where exactly it starts.

29. Jump up ↑ The Japanese version has a bunch of terminology here, but I'm guessing they're all types of armor.
30. Jump up ↑ yesssss
31. Jump up ↑ In Japanese, young people speak with slightly different words in some cases.
32. Jump up ↑ This is a bit different from real history. Yase Doji are actually imperial pallbearers.
33. Jump up ↑ Referring to Yashamaru and Kumomaru.
34. Jump up ↑ Shinno. [2]
35. Jump up ↑ A real person. [3]
36. Jump up ↑ This is true, by the way. Look it up on Wikipedia.
37. Jump up ↑ I'm not sure if there is a real term for this. 昔本国的三大怨灵.
38. Jump up ↑ We are now on Kyouko's point of view.
39. Jump up ↑ We are now on Tenma's point of view.
40. Jump up ↑ A channel for Harutora and Natsume to communicate with them.
41. Jump up ↑ The Melancholy of Tsuchimikado Natsume sounds like a great name for a book.
42. Jump up ↑ The phenomenon where shikigami flicker out of existence after taking damage or being summoned poorly.
43. Jump up ↑ I'm not too sure about the correctness of the last two sentences.
44. Jump up ↑ Think a small flashlight shaped like a pen.